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# cineACTION

**COLLABORATION**

**FRENCH NEW WAVE: 50 YEARS**



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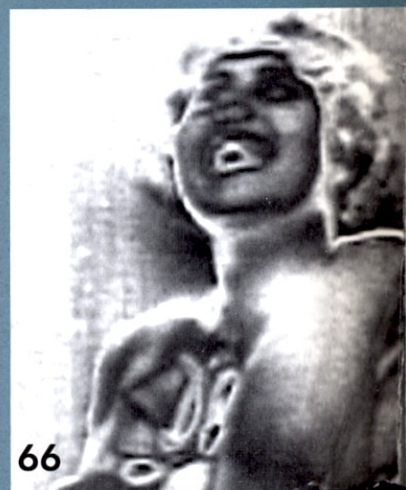
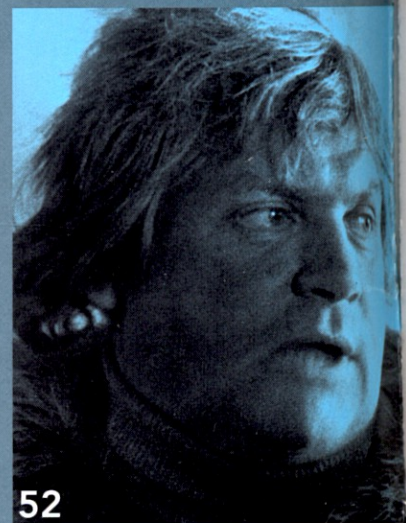
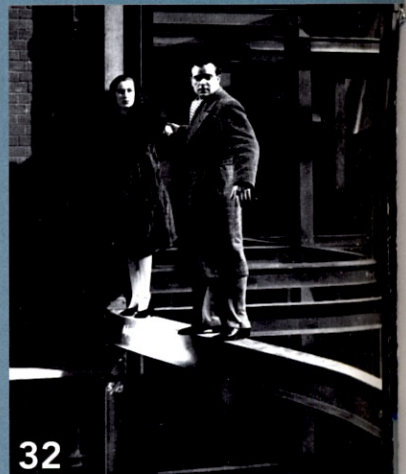
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## **This issue explores the inherent nature of the cinema as a collaborative art form.**

From its earliest inception, as in the Lumière shorts noted for their documentation of reality, one can argue that the subjects' being filmed had an awareness of the camera that turned them into participants in the process of representing life.

Collaboration in the classical Hollywood cinema was a necessary element in the efficiency of large scale production, but it also allows for the possibility of the collaboration of great artists who bring the best of their skills, talent and creativity to the project. Even the most celebrated of the *auteurs* like Hitchcock or Welles, who defined individual genius, still relied on their partnerships with artists like Bernard Herrmann or Greg Toland to realize their vision. Collaborations are not always agreeable experiences and tension may fuel creativity as much as convivial relations do. Fritz Lang and Otto Preminger were disliked by many actors who nevertheless managed to give remarkable performances in films under their direction. Collaboration in the contemporary commercial cinema has been complicated by the advances of technology, broadening notions of collaboration. Arguably, at present, the international art film may have the most potential for the continuation of a cinema reliant on the more traditional concept of collaborative practice.

When we originally planned this theme we were inspired by great collaborations as, for example, Sternberg and Dietrich, Garbo and William Daniels and Clarence Bull, John Ford and John Wayne, Howard Hawks and Jules Furthman, Scorsese and De Niro. We were pleased to receive such a wide range of responses and ideas about what constitutes collaborative filmmaking, ranging from the significance of the agent in classical cinema to the collaborations between musical composers and experimental filmmakers, to the personal cinema of the French New Wave which becomes a significant period of collaborative filmmaking in an expressive form very different from that of classical Hollywood.

The idea of collaborations opens up an often overlooked way of thinking about the familiar, which expands interpretation and critical responses. We hope this issue will stimulate further discussion by both critics and viewers who are central participants in the collaborative process that is cinema.

—*Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe*

## **CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

### **ISSUE 81**

#### **WAR FILMS**

These films present an intriguing contradiction in that this popular and historically omnipresent genre has not just sunk to the bottom of audience appeal—witness the box office disasters of even critically acclaimed films on US involvement in the Mideast, especially Iraq—but at the same time, the success of war at the level of the fictional and cartoonish superhero has never been more prevalent nor fiscally rewarding.

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At this year's Toronto International Film Festival a publicist commented that there had never been so many female directors' works being screened, to which a critic retorted that nevertheless, they still made up a fraction of all the directors.

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# French New Wave

## FIFTY YEARS

Ten years ago, we dedicated issue number 48 to celebrating the 40th anniversary of the French New Wave. Our extended editorial in that issue expressed our commitment to the cinema of the New Wave and its immense contribution to cinema culture. A decade later our admiration for these films is as strong as ever and we are pleased to once again celebrate an anniversary of the movement. We remain inspired by the personal vision and immense creative energy that flowered in the post war period. The passion for the cinema, for the experimentation with sound/image/narrativity, was grounded in an intellectual and critical understanding and appreciation for the cinema. The French New Wave still resonates internationally, in the films of Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Martin Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, Claire Denis, Wong Kar-wai and others. Many of the New Wave films retain a freshness and originality that is, at once, specific to a social moment and a contemporary one. —Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe



Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot, *Contempt*.  
Godard's meditations on the cinema.





LEFT: Jean-Paul Belmondo, *Le Doulos*

RIGHT: Catherine Deneuve and Françoise Dorléac, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* is Demy's tribute to the Hollywood musical.

BELOW RIGHT: Michel Bouquet and Stéphane Audran, *Just Before Nightfall*.







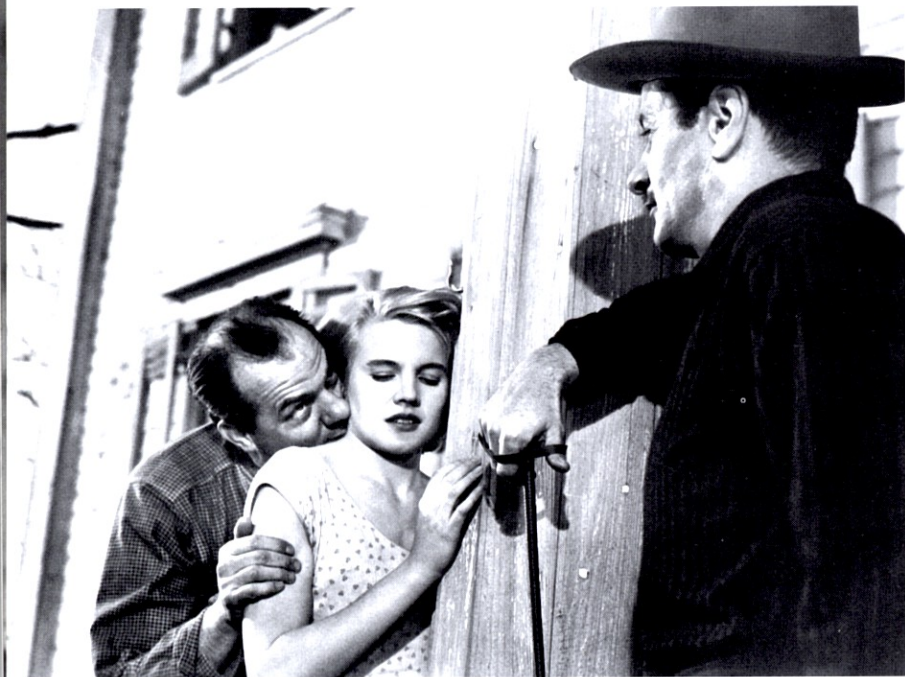
# Elia Kazan 1909–2009

## A MAN IN CONFLICT

BY RICHARD LIPPE



*Wild River.* Montgomery Clift is involved in a struggle between delivering progress and the meaning of a life.



*Baby Doll.* Baby Doll is the centre of attention. Carroll Baker's performance makes her warrant it.

Elia Kazan rightly retains his position as a major director of 20th Century American theatre and cinema. Co-founding the Actors Studio in 1947, Kazan reshaped notions of acting early in the post-WW II period and, with Marlon Brando and James Dean, he reinterpreted the 1950s hero as rebel and/or outsider with an explosive intensity (John Garfield introduced the concept and Montgomery Clift, with his reticence, gave it a more introspective quality). He was also in part responsible, with these two actors, for reinventing the traditional concepts of male beauty and masculinity. In regard to the former, it was a man who displayed a direct raw sensuality and eroticism (Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*), and openly courted being seen as an object of desire. In addition, both Brando and Dean were willing to expose their emotional needs, expressing a wide range of feelings. These feelings significantly included vulnerability and a willingness to acknowledge their own sensitivity and that of others. Yet Kazan's hero figures remain very much within the confines of heterosexual constructs of what defines masculinity and femininity. In *On the Waterfront* and *East of Eden*, Brando and Dean respectively play characters that are initially boyish but grow, through a series of circumstances that demand self-confrontation, into manhood. Kazan's notion of manhood had its limitations. For instance, he claimed that Montgomery Clift, who was gay, wasn't man enough to do justice to his role in *Wild River*, particularly in his intimate scenes with Lee Remick.

As a filmmaker, Kazan brought his theatrical background with actors, staging and artifice to the cinema. In the late 1940s, as *Panic in the Streets* illustrates, he strongly responded to the realist aesthetic film embraced in the immediate post-WW II years. *On the Waterfront*, *East of Eden*, *Baby Doll* and *Wild River* make wonderful use of on location shooting, displaying a strong response to the interplay between environment, actor and characterization. Kazan also made expert use of deep focus photography and understood the importance time and space have for the medium.

Despite Kazan's talent and awareness, it is evident, arguably, that his most valued works fail to realize their full potential. For example, *East of Eden* contains Dean's highly original and deeply felt per-





*On the Waterfront.* A rooftop encounter in which Terry allows Edie to see his gentleness.

formance but the film suffers with the casting of Julie Harris who, in addition to being too mature for the character she plays, has no on-screen chemistry, either physically or emotionally, with Dean. (In contrast, Kazan, during this period, with Eva Marie Saint in *On the Waterfront* and Carroll Baker in *Baby Doll*, made inspired casting choices. Their respective contribution to the films is immense. Brando never had another female co-star who has such a strong rapport, as an actress and presence, with him or allowed Brando to express tenderness as touchingly. And, with *Baby Doll*, Baker's nuanced and audacious performance provides the film with its emotional life.) Furthermore, both Raymond Massey and Jo Van Fleet, while giving strong performances, play characters that need to be more humanized creations. *Splendor in the Grass*, even more, suffers from the same problem. In it, the supporting actors play characters who repeatedly reiterate that they are narrow-minded and stupid. These works have an individualized protagonist(s) that Kazan tends to surround with one dimensional people.

It may be that *East of Eden* and *Splendor in the Grass* are flawed because Kazan's concentration was primarily on the film's thematic, child-parent conflicts. (*Baby Doll* deals with this conflict but is a more integrated work and is one of his most under-rated films.) It is a theme that, like his preoccupation with (hetero-) sexuality and its connotations of self-expression, connects him to notions of constriction and freedom. This concern aligns Kazan too with individualism which, in turn, appears to be a defining aspect of his personality.

In April 1952, Kazan testified before HUAC as a friendly witness naming names of colleagues he knew to be involved in leftist activity. Kazan informed, he said, because the American communists he knew as a member of the party in the 1930s, were authoritarians and gangsters (not unlike the character played by Lee J. Cobb in *On the Waterfront*, who thinks of himself as a self-made man who has pulled himself up by his bootstraps.) Maybe Kazan truly felt that he was doing the right thing. But, by doing so, he betrayed many of his colleagues who suffered persecution for believing that social justice and equality should be an aspect of America's identity.

Kazan himself, as his films indicate, wasn't fully satisfied with America and what it represented. *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *Pinky* acknowledge the country's racial intolerance. *East of Eden* and *Splendor in the Grass* both deal with America's puritanical streak and the latter film, in particular, addresses excessive capitalism, its recklessness and potential to produce destructive consequences. *A Face in the Crowd* questions the American public's gullibility and its fascination with celebrity, fame and power.

By all accounts, when it came to living his life, Kazan is a man who did it his way. There is a lot to admire and value in his films, despite his problematic politics. *On the Waterfront* (another child-parent themed film) can be read as Kazan's attempt to account for his willingness to comply with HUAC's demands by having his alter ego, Terry Malloy, move from informing to a metaphorical crucifixion and redemption to becoming a hero figure to his peers. Unfortunately, for Kazan, life doesn't imitate art.



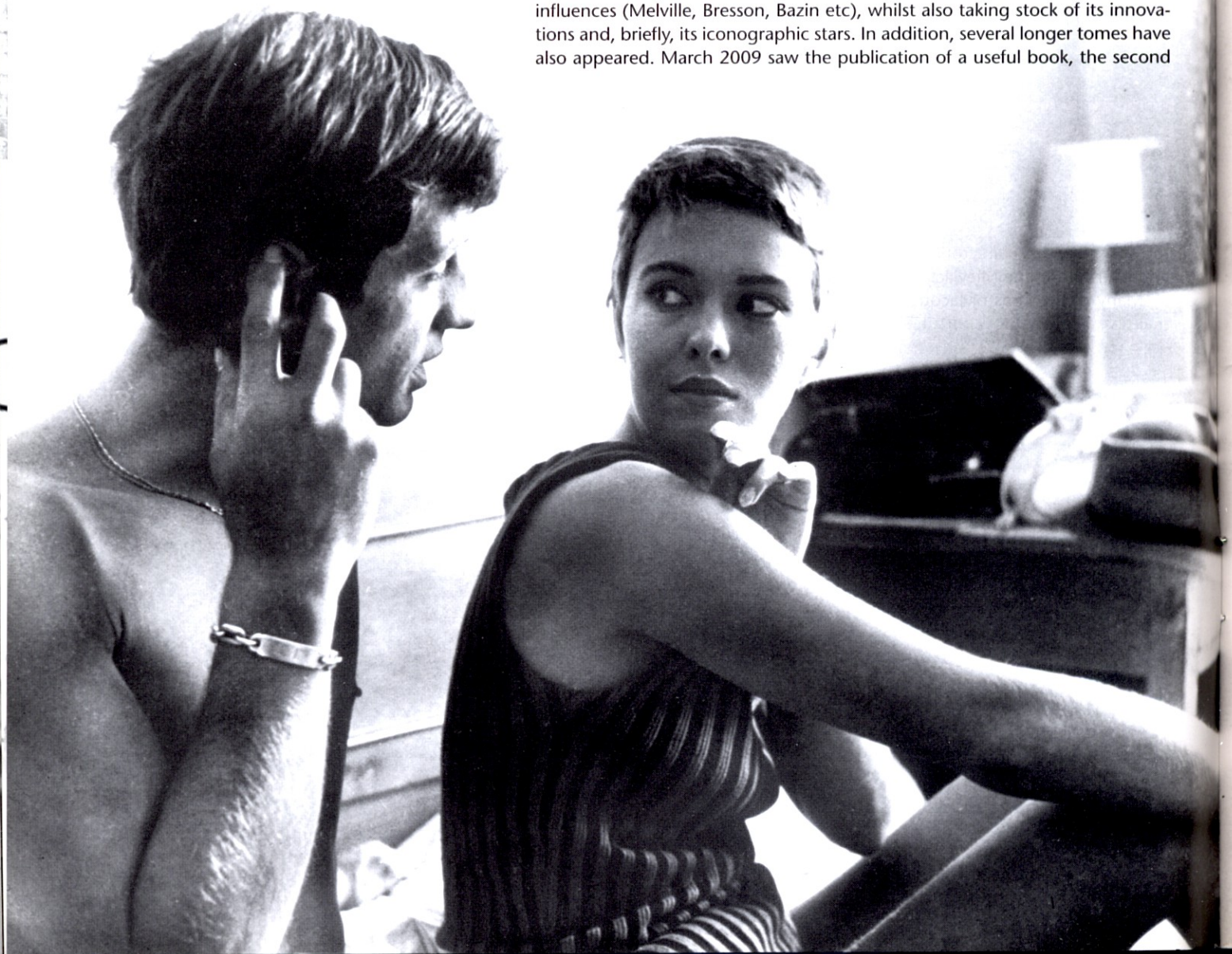
# The Second Wave

COLLABORATION AND  
THE NOUVELLE VAGUE

BY ADAM BINGHAM

2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the first flowering of the French new wave, and as such has already seen a host of screenings and features taking stock of the impact and lasting influence of this most radical film-making movement, this birth of modernist cinema.

In England, in particular, a two-month series of theatrical offerings (including a touring retrospective and several key re-releases) and a number of critical reflections in the journal *Sight and Sound* and certain broadsheet newspapers have made a point of doing more than simply revisiting the established films and filmmakers. They have ventured beyond the canonical and attempted to uncover and elucidate some of the nouvelle vague's peripheral directors (Alain Jessua, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Philippe De Broca, etc) and a selection of its influences (Melville, Bresson, Bazin etc), whilst also taking stock of its innovations and, briefly, its iconographic stars. In addition, several longer tomes have also appeared. March 2009 saw the publication of a useful book, the second





edition of *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, which collects together a number of writings both by and about the nouvelle vague and its defining texts and theoretical foundations. In so doing, it offers a guide to the historicity of the new wave, the context in which it was born and the impact that is made. Likewise, a new book (by Emilie Bickerton), which traces the history of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, similarly gets to grips with the political and theoretical context surrounding the emergence of Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer and Rivette.

However, there is much more to elucidate on the subject of the French new wave beyond its foremost directors and their formative educations and influences: beyond, as it were, the first wave of talent. The discourse on its key actors and stars highlights the blind-spot to which I specifically referred above, an important area that has thus far been largely neglected in critical commentary: that of the multitude of collaborators who helped shape and define the movement both behind and before the camera<sup>1</sup>. It is perhaps an after-effect of the centrality of the nouvelle vague directors to the *politique des auteurs*, to the inception of cinematic authorship and (at least in its initial conception) of individual agency, vision and expression in filmmaking, which has seen such a dearth of interrogative explorations into this subject. But it is most definitely a profitable subject for analysis. One need only glance cursorily over the filmographies and major personnel of the foremost new wave directors to note the recurrence of key names across a number of films for each. In point of fact, in the embryonic but fertile pre and early new wave years, the major directors themselves collaborated closely. Godard worked from scenarios written by both Rohmer and Truffaut; whilst Claude Chabrol (through his production company AJYM Films) often served as a producer for his colleagues. Furthermore, in subsequent years, during Godard's political, Maoist-driven rejection of mainstream cinema, he entered into specific collaborations that resulted in such close working relationships that these films all have dual-credits for Godard and his directorial partner: Jean-Pierre Gorin at first; and later Ann-Marie Miéville.

Many of the films of Jacques Rivette similarly reveal a filmmaker especially interested in building and shaping projects around the contributions not only of his co-writers but of his casts. In works like *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (*Celine and Julie Go Boating* 1974, *Le pont du Nord* 1981 and *Haut bas fragile* (*High Low Fragile* 1995)), he has allowed his cast complete freedom to write and shape their own material. *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, Rivette's biggest hit, developed from an idea by the director and star Juliet Berto. She then worked with fellow actress Dominique Labourier, and the pair conceived of their own narrative lines for their respective characters in the film, even to the extent of living together and sharing their dreams. Rivette's role in this process, Berto noted, was akin to surgery: he would simply watch over the developing narrative and help his actors to flesh it out and work it into shape. Finally, the ambiguous film-within-a-film of *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, the events inside the old house that the two protagonists sporadically visit, was conceived by another writer entirely: Eduardo de Gregorio. Indeed, the two Henry James stories that were combined to form these sections were unknown to Rivette. They were originated entirely by Gregorio and further refined by the two actresses that feature as the ghostly women: Bulle Ogier and Marie-France Pisier. As such, it is easy to see how art then fol-

lowed methodology, with the actual agency of Berto and Labourier reflected within the film, in particular its manifold scenes in which Celine and Julie assert control over their lives and unfolding stories, with the feeling that it is being made up on the spot conveying perfectly the sense that these are *their* stories.

It is thus not difficult to discern that a collaborative spirit and working method was very much in evidence in the new wave directors. Only Eric Rohmer, in some ways the most remote of the nouvelle vague, proves the partial exception to the rule. Very few actors and certainly no stars have re-appeared in his work, and he has tended almost exclusively to write his own screenplays. Even with regard to directors of photography, there have been a number of (largely unheralded) figures with whom Rohmer has worked. Following sporadic collaborations with Néstor Almendros over the course of nineteen years beginning in 1964, which yielded six films and three shorts, there has been only one cinematographer who has remained with the director for any sustained period of time (Diane Baratier, who has photographed every Rohmer film since 1995).

Beyond this, the other seminal nouvelle vague figures almost immediately built around them a more or less stable and secure cadre of collaborators who, though not necessarily present on every film, nonetheless can be seen to have significantly contributed to the work of the directors with whom they were associated. Claude Chabrol exemplifies this facet of nouvelle vague collectivity more than any of the movement's filmmakers. In diametric opposition to Rohmer, he has from the very beginning of his career (with his first film, *Le Beau Serge* 1958), relied on the same key personnel again and again, collecting around him a family with whom he was perfectly comfortable and who, by Chabrol's own admission, contributed immensely to the artistry and meaning of his work. Indeed, the writer of Chabrol's second film *Les Cousins* 1959, Paul Gégauff, created in that film a blueprint that the director would return to in a number of subsequent features, a blueprint directly drawn from his and Chabrol's contrastive views and personalities.

This schematic revolves around the dichotomy between a withdrawn and an outgoing, gregarious personality (usually but not exclusively two men) who find themselves in competition, frequently for the affections of a woman. From *Les Biches* [1967] onward, this woman would be portrayed by Chabrol's then-wife Stéphane Audran in what is known as the 'Hélène cycle', the title of which alludes to the recurrent name of the female lead, and in turn to those of the two men, Charles for the former, and for the latter, appropriately enough, Paul. In six films, including many of Chabrol's most famous works<sup>2</sup>, the dramatic conflict involves a variation on this situation and its attendant themes of power, domination and the tendency for those in close relationships to figuratively consume one another. The culmination of this facet of Chabrol's cinema then comes in the excoriating *Une partie de plaisir* [*Pleasure Party* 1975], in which Gégauff, his ex-wife and young daughter to all intents and purposes each play themselves in a painful story (filmed in Gégauff's own house) of the collapse of an apparently stable, happy family unit.

Like Rohmer, Chabrol presents a singular and extreme case of a filmmaker who laid particular stress on collaboration and for whom 'there is a great emphasis on the film crew'<sup>3</sup>. However, there are a number of writers whose recurrent work with various directors highlights the significant contributions

**Breathless.** Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg.  
Godard radically rethinks sound/image/narrativity.





*Mississippi Mermaid.* Michel Bouquet and Catherine Deuve, a mysterious woman who may be a murderess.

they made to their respective films. For example, the presence of Jean Gruault as co-writer on both *Jules et Jim* 1964 and *Les deux anglaises et le continent* (Two English Girls) [1971], both triangular love stories adapted from novels by Henri-Pierre Roché, supports the notion that François Truffaut saw him as being able to bring specific, definable qualities to these projects<sup>4</sup>. This is something that would appear to be confirmed with Truffaut's later *L'histoire d'Adèle H* (The Story of Adele H 1975), which was also co-written by Gruault. Like its forebears the Roché adaptations, it is a story of intense, obsessive love fermenting over time, of one person longing for an unresponsive other and attempting to bridge the distance between them with frantic letter and diary writing (in this regard, one is struck by Gruault having co-written Godard's *Les carabinières* [1963], as this too has a narrative that makes extended use of letters sent between couples removed from one another).

Beyond these examples, the most obvious area of collaboration to pursue relates to those figures who have worked with more than one of the new wave directors, who collaborated with two or more of its key figures. Of the two chief areas to which this applies – actor/star, cinematographer – there are several pervasive examples of noteworthy contributions by personnel whose artistic agency brought to the films something more than subservience to a director's vision: that is, whose work on the film affected and influenced its development and ultimate

realization, and without whom one feels the resulting picture would have been markedly different, if it had been made at all.

The logical starting point here is the performer, the literal face of the nouvelle vague, as screen stardom underwent almost as comprehensive and seismic a shift at this time as that of the director. In several features, critic Ginette Vincendeau has stated that new conceptions and personifications of stardom went hand in hand with the new cinematic forms that helped define the new wave: 'the cinema of the *nouvelle vague*...required a new model of stardom to differentiate it from the mainstream<sup>5</sup>'. And whilst this was equally true of both male and female performers, the latter is the better place to begin, if only because the real-life union of a number of directors and their recurring leading ladies led to a number of especially meaningful and productive collaborations. The example had already been established in Brigitte Bardot, who was seen to encapsulate the revolution of stardom in her husband Roger Vadim's new wave precursor *Et Dieu...créa la femme* (And God Created Woman 1956) with her heady cocktail of insouciant sexuality, youthfulness and fluid movement between being an object of the male gaze and the subject of her own personal desire and agency. For this reason, Bardot is certainly a significant figure. However, it is with an older, at the time already experienced actress, that the nouvelle vague began to define the parameters of its new stardom, and to establish models of





*Vivre sa Vie*. Anna Karina becomes an icon of the cinema.

character and performance that went hand in hand with their new conceptions of the director.

Jeanne Moreau, a classically-trained actress, had been appearing in films for almost ten years when Louis Malle cast her in his debut *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Lift to the Scaffold* 1958). It has been noted by some critics that Bardot was too big a star, and thus too expensive to cast, by the time the new wave directors began their feature filmmaking careers. This was undoubtedly the case, but one may well contend that as significant a reason for her status as peripheral to the nouvelle vague (especially as Truffaut and others had been very vocal in advocating her iconographic allure) was the fact that she had already been defined in the cinema for audiences, was a known entity that had by 1959 been looked at with eyes that had shaped and crystallized her persona too concretely. Moreau, in contradistinction, was much more of an open book and a blank canvas - at least to the extent that she could be remoulded and re-invented by filmmakers intent on stamping their own signature on the cinema. Before Malle, Moreau had appeared in a number of films: from crime thrillers like Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (*Hands off the Loot* 1954), Gilles Grangier's *Gas-Oil* 1955, and *Le salaire du péché* (*The Wages of Sin* 1956) and melodramas such as Jean Stelli's *Dernier amour* (*Last Love* 1949), to historical dramas like *La reine Margot* (*Queen Margot* 1954) and even comedies (Marc Allégret's *Julietta* 1953 with

Jean Marais). There were a number of varied love interest roles among these early films, including in *The Wages of Sin* one very close to *Lift to the Scaffold*, and this was the raw material on which Malle built in his first two films. However, he did so in a way that re-mapped the contours of Moreau's image and established almost singlehandedly the new direction that would be subsequently refined as the new wave model of stardom that championed authenticity and naturalism as a direct contrast to the quality French cinema so reviled by Godard, Truffaut and their colleagues.

Beginning *Lift to the Scaffold* with an extreme close-up of Moreau's face as she talks to her lover on the phone, Malle uses his actress to move the focus away from an erotic contemplation of the body (as with Bardot, of the kind deconstructed by Godard in *Le Mépris* 1964) and onto the face; from heady sexuality to cool, intellectual sensuality in which feelings (of love and romantic fulfilment) are prized above pleasures of the flesh. This film also initiated that aspect of Moreau's persona constructed around notions of confinement, containment and liberation. The film takes flight from its thwarted, proto-typical noir narrative of the married woman and her lover conspiring to kill off the former's husband and end a staid marriage (in which real emotions were never present or acted upon) to highlight Moreau and her character's lack of traditional glamour and polish, her status as anti-femme fatale; indeed anti-film





*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg.* Catherine Deneuve and Anne Vernon



*Masculin Féminin.* Jean-Pierre Léaud and Chantal Goya. Between 1966–68, Léaud appeared in five Godard feature-length films and one short.



star. Believing herself spurned when her lover seemingly abandons her, she is left to wander the wet, grimy Parisian streets, all lit in naturalistic, low key lighting that leaves her looking distinctly unkempt without any make-up and with dishevelled hair and awkward posture.

The extra-marital affair and murderous crime bear no fruit in *Lift to the Scaffold*, but subsequently the leaving behind of an oppressive marriage and family home became the central focus of Malle's next film, *Les Amants* (*The Lovers* 1959). Here, Moreau's frustrated housewife becomes almost immediately smitten with a young stranger and, after one night, walks out on her husband and son. It was with this successful, controversial film that Moreau really began to emerge as a pre-eminent new wave actress and star, in which notions of freedom over constraint, sensual fulfilment against familial stability and comfort, began to define her star image.

Four years later, this persona formed the raw materials of a role that Truffaut would capitalise upon for what is surely Moreau's defining part and performance: that of Catherine in *Jules et Jim*. In this film, which begins with a blank screen and Moreau's voice talking about love, again privileging her feelings and consciousness, Truffaut conceives of Catherine as a creature of impulse whose wilful aversion to containment becomes almost pathological. The titular men in the film are forever setting themselves rules to follow, but Catherine explodes any borders and boundaries before her: from partners, models of femininity (wife, mother, lover), and even gender in her famous scene as Thomas. It is thus the case that, for Truffaut as for Malle before him (not to mention Jacques Demy, who cast a platinum blonde Moreau as a gambling addict in *La baie des anges*/*Bay of Angels* 1963), Moreau represents the challenge rather than the promise of sexuality, its amorphousness and potential instability as opposed to its open availability.

Beside Moreau, the new wave's other key actress must be Anna Karina, sometime wife of Jean-Luc Godard and indispensable star of seven of his films between 1961 and 1967: indispensable because to varying degrees these films are all built firmly around her presence and fixated on her image. This was so much the case that cameraman Charles Bitsch has noted that 'with Godard it became clear quite quickly that his life with Anna Karina fed into his films'. Indeed, a French documentary by Luc Lagier entitled *Godard: L'Amour, La Poesie* (*Godard: Love, Poetry*) specifically relates how, over the course of their work together, the director's cinema traces the evolution and dissolution of his relationship with Karina, their whirlwind courtship, intense marriage, and ultimately their bitter and turbulent divorce.

Whilst this project leads to some strained and unconvincing textual analyses, it nonetheless points toward the incontrovertible fact that whilst these films may or may not be about Karina's relationship with Godard, they certainly are in one way or another about Karina herself. The pair's first collaboration, *Le petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier* 1960), offsets its pointed political narrative with a subplot involving the protagonist photographing a model (Karina) with whom he falls in love and begins a relationship. It is hard to ignore a narrativization of Godard's own situation here: from merely working with an actress (seen initially in extreme long shot amid the hustle and bustle of urban Geneva) to fixating on the face of a woman (a model, as Karina was before becoming an actor) with who he is becoming involved. It is the time for reflection over action, intones

the protagonist of *Le petit soldat*, and it is through the reality and comparative knowability of Karina (as against the amorphous and confusing political machine) that such reflection takes place.

As a result, if Moreau begins the contemplation of the face that became a facet of new wave actresses (one can see it with Chabrol and his own wife Stéphane Audran, especially in *Les bonnes femmes* 1960 and *Les Biches* 1967), then it is with Karina that it reaches its pinnacle: in which narrative, indeed often fiction, is arrested and destabilised whilst Godard celebrates his actress/wife simply being in front of his camera. There is a marked sense in which their films together, whatever their ostensible fictive and generic identities, are also documentaries about Karina. Even more than Moreau, where one feels, in say *Jules et Jim*, that Truffaut is celebrating a role played by his star (and lover), it is for Godard a celebration of Karina playing a role, of actress before character. This is crystallized in *Une femme est une femme* (*A Woman is a Woman* 1961), in which, like *Jules et Jim*, we hear Karina's voice before the movie begins. However, in contradistinction to the romantic musings of Catherine/Moreau, what Karina gives us is bold and extradiegetic: Lights. Camera. Action. She, as Karina, initiates the narrative; and her wink at the camera in the opening scene further teases us into succumbing to the film's knowing breakdown of transparency, its self-awareness that it is really about the slippage between character and actor, part and performance.

If Jeanne Moreau represents a case of an established actress (not necessarily a star) being re-modelled into a nouvelle vague icon, then her male counterpart was undoubtedly Jean-Paul Belmondo. Like Moreau, he had been classically trained for the stage, and had already appeared in films before he was catapulted to nouvelle vague iconoclasm. In the 1970s, he and Alain Delon were the two biggest male stars in French cinema, offering contrasting, often diametrically opposed models of masculinity and performance style. But it was in his new wave work that Belmondo was born in the cinema, even though this birth can in fact be said to pre-date *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless* 1959). Although it was doubtless Godard's debut that crystallized the actor's iconic, insolent demeanour and roguish, playful, performative charm, it was in a film made immediately prior to it that he first announced this particular potential. *À double tour* [1959] was Claude Chabrol's third film, and features Belmondo as an abrasive and free-spirited youth who courts the daughter of an imploding bourgeois family in what is a striking precursor to Chabrol's mature-period thrillers. However, in the immediate wake of *Les cousins*, there is still an undercurrent of open air, narratively de-dramatized, location hopping zeal in the film, and this aspect centres entirely on Belmondo. Like *Breathless* it begins with the actor in his car, racing through the streets and passing comment on and insulting the people he encounters. Like *Breathless*, his character engages in a tumultuous, not-quite relationship with a hesitant, reticent girl. And like *Breathless*, his character (László Kovacs, a name that reappears in Godard's first film), is seen luxuriating in the romantic splendour of an urban milieu (near Aix-en-Provence).

Thus, the seeds of *Breathless*' Michel Poicard were very much planted in advance of that film, seeds that Godard re-moulded into the criminal figure of his own protagonist. And it is this element of crime that proves a significant addition for the embryonic Godardian universe. Belmondo's Kovacs in *À double tour* is ultimately engaged in solving rather than perpetrating a crime,





*Day for Night* is Truffaut's homage to the cinema.

possibly with a redemptive eye to ingratiating himself with the bourgeois patriarch and his daughter. But in *Breathless* social transgression goes hand in hand with cinematic transgression, as a majority of the film's revolutionary techniques, its jump cuts and addresses to camera, become associated purely with Michel, with his ebullient energy and personal point of view. It is a celebration of the constructed artificiality of the medium and the arbitrariness of technique; and for Godard Belmondo and Michel are constructions themselves. In other words, in a counterpoint to his other work of this period - such as the crime films of Jean-Pierre Melville or Claude Sautet - Belmondo was for Godard the star as star: or, discursively, the actor becoming a star. This explains why, in *Breathless*, Michel's image-consciousness dominates: how he puts himself together in line with exterior precepts of masculinity. He represents a character and actor as work in process.

By the time of *Pierrot le fou* 1965, which functions as a summation of Godard's cinema until that point, Belmondo was the perfect fit for a director who (as the opening dialogue about Velasquez suggests) was attempting to move beyond the concrete, beyond the world of character, narrative and genre. Most overtly, the fact that the protagonist's companion in crime constantly calls him by the wrong name attests to this character's lack of precise definition, as does the pervasive echoes of *Breathless* inherent on a scenario featuring Belmondo on the lam with an old girlfriend. As a result, Godard is able to use

Belmondo as a key element in *Pierrot le fou*'s bookending of his early career, to represent (along with Karina) the vagaries of the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard in a film in which, at the end, he foreshadows *Weekend*'s famous 'Fin du cinéma' by presiding over the primacy of the denotative, the immediate. Thus, one can see Belmondo as Belmondo: that is, as 'the star', as an essentially unstable collection of signs drawn from extra-textual inference as much as textual construction. Or, conversely, one can regard him as simply playing Godard, seduced and betrayed by Anna Karina, furiously writing of his desire to depict pure emotion without channelling it through characters, and ultimately prostrating himself helpless before a seascape that is merely the water, the sun and the sky. Given such a wealth of potentiality, one wonders how this film would have fared if Godard had cast his first choice in the role of Ferdinand: Richard Burton.

Beyond Belmondo, the other most significant male performer in the new wave, and key collaborator with Truffaut, Godard and (in *Out 1, noli me tangere* 1971) with Rivette, was Jean-Pierre L aud. He is a figure who differed markedly from his counterpart Belmondo; an actor whose often withdrawn, remote personality and physically gaunt and angular presence seems almost perpetually awkward, poised on the brink of conflict with those around him. In contradistinction to Belmondo's easy swagger and mastery of his landscape (think how Godard perennially captures him in movement, even when shot at the





*The 400 Blows* was photographed by Henri Deca  .

end of *Breathless*), L  aud frequently appears uncomfortable, hemmed in, as though about to be found out as some kind of imposter who does not belong. It is this feature of his persona (especially as shaped and employed by Truffaut) that gives the extended tracking shot at the close of *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows* 1959) such force, such cumulative power. Nor was it lost on Godard. In the two films of his in which L  aud takes a central role (*Masculin, F  minin* 1966 and *La Chinoise* 1967), he is almost always seen inside, within cafes in the former and in the latter in a single apartment. In Godard, he rarely ventures out into the world outside his window: lest, one feels, his overt politicking and sloganeering be unpicked or undermined.

L  aud's significance was immediately cemented in Truffaut's first feature, when he was immortalised as the director's on-screen alter-ego Antoine Doinel. The legendary freeze-frame finale of this pre-eminent, foundational nouvelle vague text arrested the delinquent Doinel at a point of indecision and uncertainty. It caught and defined him at a point in-between: sea and sand, incarceration and liberation, home and the world, past and future. It was a prophetic moment, because his subsequent work extends and dramatizes this dichotomy, placing him in stories in which he is cast adrift between opposing forces and impulses, such as between wife and lover in several Doinel films, or between fiction and reality when he is directly addressed as L  aud by Godard the director in *La Chinoise*.

What further becomes apparent when considering this dual-

ity is the fact that Godard and Truffaut seemed to bring out a symbiotic quality wherein they each captured one side of the same personality, with each half reflecting and feeding into the other. It is striking to note that, in the interval between *Antoine et Colette* 1962 and *Baisers Vol  s* (*Stolen Kisses* 1968)—between, that is, the continuing adventures of Doinel through adolescence and young adulthood—Godard made the two aforementioned films in which L  aud is cast as an ostensibly outspoken political revolutionary. *La Chinoise* in particular appeared only a year before *Stolen Kisses*, before the return of Antoine Doinel and the comically awkward adulthood envisioned for him by Truffaut: and it is tempting to read these very qualities in *Stolen Kisses* (Doinel's lack of comfort with women and jobs, and completely apolitical even in 1968) as becoming sublimated and finding an outlet, finding expression, in the political activism of Godard. Indeed, in *Masculin, F  minin*, L  aud's character refers to himself on the phone as General Doinel, thus alluding slyly to Godard's conception of Truffaut's character. If one returns to the idea of different possibilities suspended in time at the close of *The 400 Blows*, then perhaps Truffaut and Godard offer alternative takes on the directions taken by young Antoine, the path chosen. Perhaps, in the last instance, they each hypothesize the different dreams of the young Doinel/L  aud as he contemplates his life to live before him.

Aside from performers, perhaps the key collaborative face behind the camera is that of the cinematographer, especially for



the new wave and their various affronts to visual practice, and unquestionably the key name here is that of Raoul Coutard. His partnership with Godard was amongst the most fruitful in European cinema, and endured across all but one of the director's features from his debut *Breathless* through to *Weekend* (the one work he did not shoot being *Masculin, Féminin*). During this period, Coutard had been instrumental in developing several of the stylistic tropes associated with Godard. Indeed, one could argue that the new style that burst forth in *Breathless* came in part from Coutard. He had begun his career as a war photographer and was thus able to immediately bring to bear an expertise in new lightweight cameras and fast stock on the one hand, and on the other a practical comfort with and ability to adapt to Godard's unpolished, impressionistic, location-based shoot.

It is difficult to assess any unilateral artistic contribution a cinematographer may make to a film, particular one so desirous of realizing a director's vision as Coutard has always professedly been. Nonetheless, commentators have spoken of a recognizable Coutard style; and to this end, it is surely no coincidence that Truffaut's two most stylistically audacious and experimental works—*Jules et Jim* and *Tirez sur le pianist* (*Shoot the Pianist* 1960)—were shot by this DOP. In fact, after having worked with Henri Decaë on *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut paid sporadic visits to see the rushes of *Breathless*, and on the strength of Coutard's work with Godard asked the cinematographer to work with him on his next feature (*Shoot the Pianist*). Thus, as with the aforementioned writers, one can (however tentatively) conclude that Coutard was regarded as having a specific expertise that would support and enhance a particular style of film.

The fact of location shooting is paramount in this regard. But one should take this a step further than it is often taken, as Decaë's work with Chabrol and Truffaut, Charles Bitsch's with Rivette and Daniel Lacambre and Néstor Almendros' with Rohmer were all heavily location-based. With Coutard and his regular collaborators there is often rather more than simply a naturalistic aesthetic at work. In Godard, Truffaut and Demy (Coutard shot his debut, *Lola* 1960), there is a pervasive sense of a subjectively-rendered environment that tends to countermand any detailed notion of the documentary approach that some commentators have argued to be at the heart of Godard in particular; and the subjectivity that is rendered is frequently that of the filmmaker himself. This alludes to the fact that Coutard's collaborative (and new wave) acumen came directly from his overt, fore-grounded presence as the eye of the director. After all, in no less than three Godard films (*Le petit soldat*, *Le mépris* and *La chinoise*) is Coutard directly drawn attention to in the text, to the extent of being seen on screen in the latter two works.

So consider Godard and Demy. *Breathless* could certainly be said to rhapsodize over Paris, just as *Lola* does over Nantes. But whose rhapsody do these films represent? The male characters of both films are in one way or another eager to leave their cities, the women at best indifferent, with no real connection to their environment either. One is then left with the filmmaker luxuriating in the landscape, not of a kind concordant with the city symphony films of old. Rather, in contradistinction to the grand narratives and of Ruttman and Vertov et al, they depict the divergent, constituent parts of the cityscape that open out and reveal themselves before Coutard's almost completely street-level camera<sup>6</sup>, a camera that looks into the faces of the real people who emerge and whose gaze is returned by these unwitting extras.

The ultimate feeling that Godard and Coutard create in these and other films is not, then, simply discursive, but as though the whole city was a film set in waiting, a space to be opened up, narrated into existence, as the protagonists in a knockabout gangster farce (or musical pastiche or sci-fi noir) move through and within it and impose their stories upon it. This is something that disappeared from Godard's work when the relationship with Coutard ended after *Weekend*, and it never re-appeared. Neither did Demy's subsequent work trade so heavily on the heightened naturalism of *Lola*. Thus, the importance, if perhaps not the personal vision, of Coutard, can be taken as beyond question.

There are many, many more figures who could have been considered in a study such as this; many more performers (Stéphane Audran, Bernadette Lafont, Jean-Claude Brialy, the only actor to have worked with all five major new wave filmmakers), more cinematographers (Jean Rabier, Néstor Almendros), to say nothing of composers such as Georges Delerue, Michel Legrand or Paul Misraki. It is, though, a difficult area to begin to open up, particularly with regard to a cinematographer or composer, wherein the tendency would presumably be to trace commonalities and, however implicitly, to re-inscribe authorship. And the fact remains that, even if one were accurate in assigning a measure of artistic agency away from the director (if, say, one had a *Citizen Kane*-style credit that elevated the DOP to a top billing), one is still led back down a potentially blind alley. So this or that shot did not originate with the director! So what? Does this negate a film? Does it negate a director and his or her achievement? Does it even negate authorship for those (like myself) still interested in archaic studies such as tracing salient styles and techniques? The sub-text of a feature such as this is an enhancement of one's appreciation for directors, for directors who took what they found before them in a particular collaborator and adapted themselves to new, perhaps ever-changing circumstances such as Godard's growing attraction to Karina, or his awareness of Coutard's experimental acumen. For the new wave filmmakers and their specific challenges to the then dominant order of mainstream cinema—of polished scripts, tidy narratives and self-effacing technique—such openness to inter-film development must surely rate as among their finest attributes.

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#### Notes

- 1 One major exception to this is the book *Truffaut at work*, which is based on the author Carole le Barre's firsthand experience and which contains analyses of screenplay drafts that highlight the director's collaborations with various writers.
- 2 These are: *Les Biches* [1967], *La femme infidèle* [1968], *Que la bête meure* [1969], *Le Boucher* [1969], *La Rupture* [1970] and *Juste avant la nuit* [1971]
- 3 Austin, G. *Claude Chabrol* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999) p.5
- 4 Similarly, after contributing to the ambiguous, conspiracy-led scenario of Jacques Rivette's debut, *Paris nous appartient* [1960], Grunault's work on the director's next film *La religieuse* (*The Nun* [1966]) helped flesh out a period story detailing a very real conspiratorial persecution - one which moves toward an actual suicide where the former featured several possible ones.
- 5 Vincendeau, G. *The Indiscreet Charm of Jeanne Moreau* (*Sight & Sound*, December, 1998, Vol.8, Issue.12) p.34
- 6 Coutard was famously placed in a wheelbarrow in order to obtain certain shots in *Breathless*, the long interior takes in particular.



# Vive l'Amour

BY ROBIN WOOD

Leaving aside one very early and generally inaccessible feature film and a couple of shorts dealing with gays and AIDS, Tsai Ming-Liang's *oeuvre* to date reveals an overall unifying pattern that is probably unique in the whole of world cinema. It is impossible to judge whether this was consciously planned from the outset or (as seems more likely) it defined itself at some relatively early stage in his development. Most obviously, the seven films to date are linked by the presence of Lee Kang-Sheng, usually in the central, pivotal role. (The exceptions are *Vive l'Amour*, where he shares the position with two other characters, the woman finally emerging as the central consciousness, and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, where he is part of an ensemble.) Tsai has been quoted as saying that he will never make a film without him. But one actor doesn't, in himself, constitute a pattern. More remarkable is that the seven films, seen as an ongoing series, reveal a strictly symmetrical pattern of *alternation*. In the first (*Rebels of the Neon God*), the third (*The River*), and the fifth (*What Time Is It There?*), Lee's character has a family—the *same* family in each film, played by the same two actors, in the same easily identifiable living-space with the same easily recognizable decor, their exact constitution developing from film to film: in *What Time Is It There?* the father dies (though he returns at the end, thousands of miles from home, in a curious moment of 'magic realism'). In the alternating series (*Vive l'Amour*, *The Hole*, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*); Lee appears unattached and isolated—no family is present or mentioned. Lee's character's sexuality is also somewhat shifty: he is ambiguous in *Rebels* (though with hints that





he might be gay), definitely gay in *Vive l'Amour* and *The River*, apparently hetero or undefined in all the later films with the exception of *Visage* in which he has oral sex with mathieu Amarlic. Should we assume that having sex with his father in an extremely dark gay bathhouse (*The River*), and getting viciously slapped for it when the light is turned on, has 'cured' him? Although the films are unmistakably the work of the same artist, there is some distinction to be made between the two series. The 'family' films (and especially *What Time Is It There?*) are, on the whole, more lightweight, more playful, while the non-family films are darker and have wider socio-political resonance.

Less consistently, the films are linked by recurrent imagery, most notably of water: constant rain, flooded apartments, already introduced in *Rebels* (where so many of Tsai's motifs have their origin), developed in *The River*, reaching its climax in the relentless, end-of-the-world downpour of *The Hole*. Prior to *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, *Vive l'Amour* is the only Tsai film from which water is absent. One might suggest that its place is taken by silence.

I should say here, perhaps, that, although I love all Tsai's films to date (prior to *The Wayward Cloud*, which I haven't yet seen), *Vive l'Amour*, the first I saw, still seems to me the finest—the most rigorous, the most disciplined, the most fully *thought* and *felt*. The patterning, whether of the overall sequence of films or within each separately, is fascinating in itself, but it never hardens into mere formalism. The symmetry is always at the service of the sense.

### The Silence

No, not, as with Ingmar Bergman, the silence of God (Tsai appears to be unburdened with any obsolete religious baggage), but still the silence of spiritual desolation—cultural and political as much as metaphysical. If the characters are remarkably and unusually silent, it is simply because they have nothing to talk about, or are actively *afraid* of communication. (And it seems pertinent here that Tsai never, from the outset, has used 'background' music, to guide the viewer's emotions, create moods, or, indeed, for any other purpose.)

The opening credits are (as always with Tsai) silent. During the film's first shot, Lee Kang-Sheng, making a delivery (we can't see what of, but may later assume it was a columbarium or funeral urn), says to his customer 'Sir, please sign here'. The two characters are seen in extreme longshot, out of focus, the focus being on the key dangling from the door in the foreground of the image—the 'key' to all the future action as well as to the empty apartment... After that one line of dialogue, there is no speech in the film for twenty-two minutes. This is balanced, with almost perfect symmetry, by the end of the film, where there is no dialogue whatever for twenty-four minutes. Long stretches of the middle section of the film are also without dialogue.

Tsai uses speech as idiosyncratically and as systematically as silence. The woman (who gives her name as Lin, though it turns out to be her surname, the only one we know her by) throughout the film is only shown speaking on the phone or to prospective real estate clients (one of whom refuses to speak at all, virtually annihilating her as a presence). Both the sex scenes with the young man Ah Jung are completely silent (the first one clearly at her instigation), and we never see them converse, face to face; even when he orders for them at a fast food stall (speaking, in fact, the last words in the film), she responds to his suggestions with only a change of facial expression.

### Symmetry

The two major passages of silence are, then, themselves symmetrically placed, and within them are other symmetries, most strikingly the two expressions of despair within a film in which the characters are generally afraid of expressing their emotions, even to themselves: Shiao-Kang's (Lee) attempted suicide by slashing his wrists occurs approximately ten minutes into the film, Lin's climactic tears begin ten minutes from its end. The two sex scenes are roughly equidistant from the beginning and the end respectively. The first opens with Lin refusing to be kissed, the second has as its aftermath the 'illicit' kiss bestowed on the sleeping Ah Jung by Shiao-Kang. Other 'paired' scenes are less precisely placed but add to the sense of formal 'pattern': the two brief scenes of Ah-Jung at his import/export work, two potential buyers for the apartments Lin is trying to sell (both apparently failures), a scene in a café where Shiao-Kang looks through his columbarium advertisements; echoed later in his and Ah-Jung's visit to a columbarium store. I find the sense of patterning (as against our typical cinema's 'This happened, then this happened, then this happened...') aesthetically very pleasing, but there is more to it than that, in the film's pervasive, overriding sense of futility.

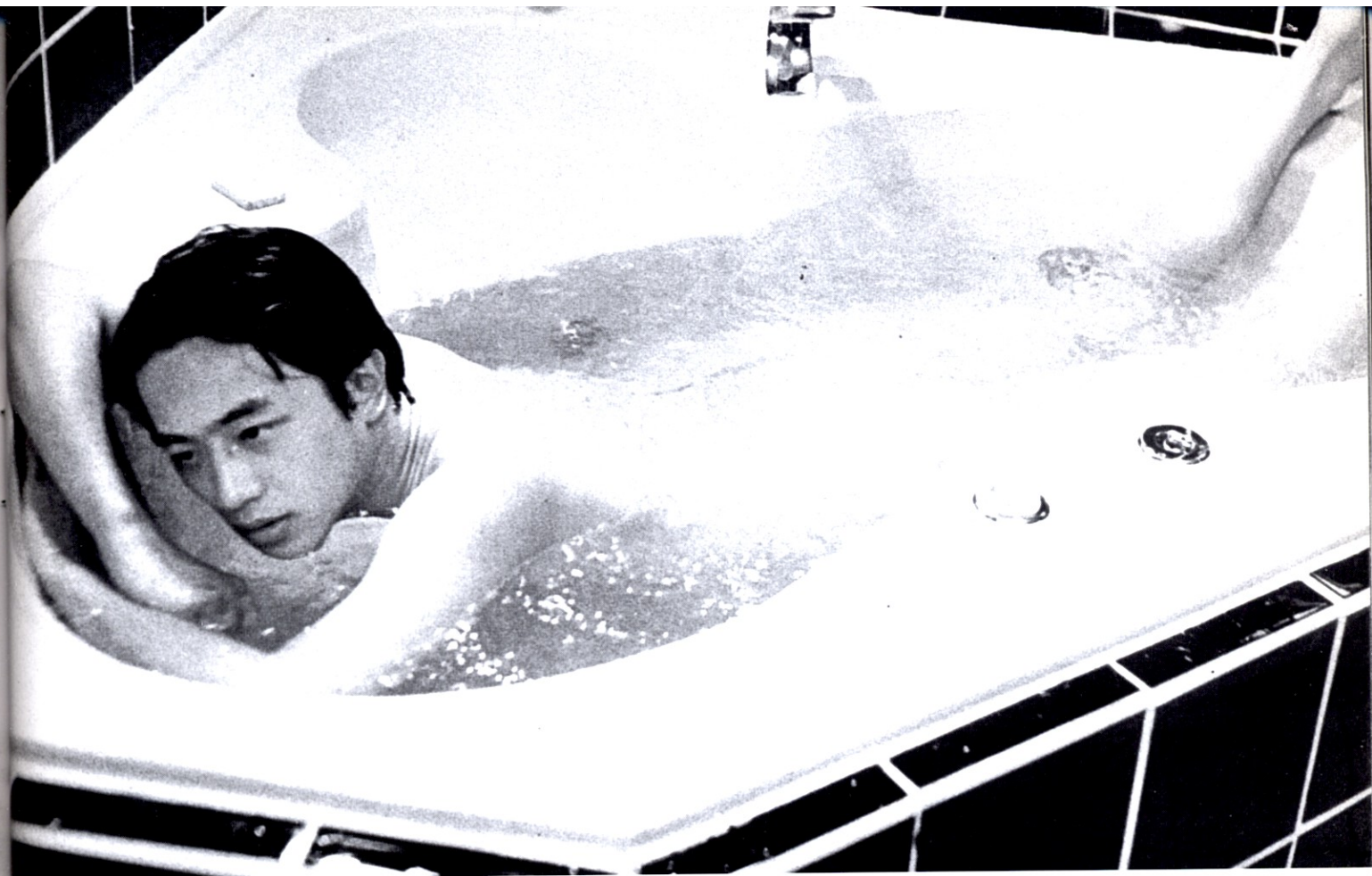
### The Work Ethic

Everyone should work—because it's good for you. Everyone should work—because it sustains the economy. Everyone should work—because if you don't, you're lazy. And work must be productive, not creative: you work, not for satisfaction or a sense of achievement, but to help maintain the system, and what would we do without it. (No question mark, because the question requires no answer.) All three of the film's protagonists work: one selling probably illegal clothing imported by Ah-Jung who collects the packages from the airport, one trying to sell expensive apartments that no one wants, and the third selling funeral urns containing the ashes of the dead. Each occupation is clearly useless, non-creative, and boring for the tradesperson. Isn't life wonderful?, as capitalism keeps telling us. But that's capitalism for you, in a nutshell: alienated labour, the sole purpose of which (even when illegal) is the continued circulation of money. Of the three characters, Shiao-Kang is the only one who seems to have any feeling for his work, and that surely a morbid interest, connecting with his attempted suicide. Ah Jung at least is his own master, but in a precarious trade in which police raids are always imminent. Lin has the worst of it, showing houses to men who seem to have little interest in actually buying one, undergoing the humiliation of having her sales talk conspicuously ignored by the man who refuses to speak to her or even recognize her presence.

### Homes

Apparently there aren't any!—at least, we never see any of the three characters in their own homes. Lin uses the luxury apartment she is supposed to be selling, presumably because it's more spacious and comfortable than her own home; Shiao-Kang steals the first key, left dangling temptingly in the door, and virtually moves in; Ah Jung (we presume) steals the second key the night he and Lin have sex (as opposed to 'make love'). Much of the film's middle section is taken up with the comedy of three people using the same apartment (it has two entrances), each believing that he/she is alone, culminating in the moment when Lin returns unexpectedly during the after-





*Vive l'Amour.* Lee Kang-Sheng

noon, disturbing Ah Jung (resting in another room), then lies on her bed (pathetically beckoning with her finger to an imaginary lover), from under which Shiao-Kang stealthily emerges, the two men meeting on the landing. There is a marvellously delicate moment when Lin, sitting up on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigarette, reaches under the bed for the ashtray, then, having found it, realizes that she didn't put it there. Lin never discovers that Shiao-Kang uses the apartment—the two never meet, despite being quite close to each other in delicate situations (Shiao-Kang masturbating under the bed on which Lin and Ah Jung are having sex). Tsai has said that the initial inspiration for the film came from the extraordinary number of expensive but empty apartments in Taipei. The one in which so much of the film's action takes place is presumably typical: luxurious, spacious, comfortable, completely characterless and impersonal, lacking in the slightest individuality, with absolutely no sense of 'home'.

### Meals

Whatever the apartment is used for (somewhere to sleep and have baths, apparently), it is not for cozy family dinners. No one eats in it. The three characters eat at fast-food stalls in the streets, never in anyone's home.

### Sex

The film juxtaposes Lin's terror of intimacy (her refusal to be kissed, her refusal to talk except for 'business' and on the phone) with Shiao-Kang's unfulfilled longing for it. Ah Jung is clearly the healthiest of the three characters, simply because

he is the most attuned to and at home in a culture that he himself (in a moment of surprising explicitness, during his phone call to Lin) refers to as hopelessly fucked up. He neither hates his work (like Lin) nor is drawn to it morbidly (like Shiao-Kang): he operates smoothly and cheerfully, taking the occasional police raid for granted, and the illegality positions him somewhat outside the 'normal' work ethic. He represents an easygoing sexuality that welcomes at least a degree of the intimacy that Lin rigorously rejects and Shiao-Kang secretly longs for. Lin's sexuality might be described as pornographic (one might equally call it 'alienated sex'): the satisfaction of physical needs, as impersonal as possible; and the violence of the climactic sex can be seen as Ah Jung's reaction to that; Shiao-Kang's is, in this social context and in the company of a sturdily heterosexual man, very much 'the love that dare not speak its name'.

### Two Privileged Moments

Two moments in the film stand out, one, in itself quite unremarkable, because of its structural importance, the other because it's among the unforgettable moments of modern cinema. The former occurs shortly after Ah Jung first discovers Shiao-Kang's presence in the apartment and confronts him out on the landing. Despite initial hostility (and Ah Jung's dishonest assertion of a superior position, not acknowledging that he is himself an intruder), the two rapidly become friends, and, in a brief scene of tidying themselves up, exchange names—in the context of the rest of the film (we never, for example, know Lin's first name), a moment of almost shocking intimacy. Its



centrality to the relationship-patterning is underlined by its positioning at (approximately) the centre of the film.

The other moment is (of course!) the kiss—the *only* kiss in the entire film, hence very decidedly privileged. It ‘answers’ the kiss refused by Lin in the first sex scene, ironically with the same partner, though here he never knows he’s been kissed. Shiao-Kang hides under the bed when the sex partners (I can’t call them ‘lovers’!) arrive in the apartment. He attempts to masturbate through the couple’s first copulation (rather brief), but remains there all night, until Lin gets up, dresses and leaves, leaving Ah Jung still asleep, prostrate and apparently exhausted. Shiao-Kang crawls out, prepares to leave, then, looking at Ah Jung, can’t resist the opportunity before him. First he lies on the bed beside him, then moves closer, then closer still, until he’s almost touching the back of Ah Jung’s head, then, obligingly but surely not deliberately, Ah Jung, in his sleep, turns over and they are face to face. Very gently, barely touching, terrified, Shiao-Kang kisses him on the lips, then leaves the apartment. We don’t see either man again. But it’s almost the film’s climactic moment, the film’s one expression of total (if necessarily unreciprocated) love.

### The Walk and the Tears

Almost, but not quite. Tsai leaves us (rightly, I think) with Lin, and perhaps the most audacious ending I have ever encountered in a fictional film. Lin is an extraordinary character—and extraordinarily perceptive on the part of her writer/director. And extraordinarily pertinent for the present period of human history. More than any other female character in any film I have seen made during the past ten years, she is (while clearly personalized and individualized) the epitome of the post-feminist woman. I grew up (in so far as I ever have) rather tardily in the 70s and early 80s, when there was a great deal of excitement going on: women’s liberation, gay liberation, black power... People today don’t seem to understand that excitement—or would rather not understand it. We believed then that the world would be changed, and that we could help change it: not only would there be equality for women, gays, blacks, etc., but all the ‘masculine’ things (Big Business, class structures, atom bombs, religious and other persecutions) would somehow be annihilated. None of this, of course, has happened, except that everything has got much, much worse. Women are now the equal of men: after all, they can have high-up jobs in corporate capitalism, and help devastate the environment; gays are actually trendy, and can afford nice suburban houses from their jobs in ‘business’; they can even (at least in Canada) get married and acquire all the traditional repressive baggage of heterosexuals. Blacks... well, they *do* have the misfortune of being more visible, but some have been allowed to prove themselves worthy, and are now enshrined in big offices. And meanwhile we all head toward the ultimate bonfire, the capitalist media putting it around that all these earthquakes and hurricanes and tidal waves and typhoons had precedents fifty or so years ago, and these things go in cycles. Nothing to do with global warming or the devastation of the environment..

So, back to Lin and her tears. Why is she crying? She has had what she thought she wanted, a night of (virtually) anonymous, (ultimately) meaningless sex. She has her (meaningless) work. Isn’t this what corporate capitalism *wants* us to want? It seems so, if one looks around at, for example, the constant distractions that inhibit thought (contemporary Hollywood cinema, teenage sex

comedies and ‘special effects’, to dazzle us with the wonders of technology, the constant emphasis on novelty, the latest, the instantly disposable, the ‘with it’, the obliteration of the past) on the one hand and the American establishment’s design for a world controlled by the USA on the other. And the position of women, who seem, nowadays, to have lost, completely, the extraordinary thrust they had in the 70s?. What are women doing, today, to overthrow corporate capitalism? Are their jobs (as secretaries or heads of departments) more important? Because the men up there are not going to do anything except continue to make profits and say this is just a lot of fuss about nothing.

All of this, it seems to me, is implicit in Lin and her interminable tears, amid the desolate environment of scrawny trees, clay and rubble, even though of course she couldn’t formulate it in such terms. If you asked her *why* she is crying, what could she answer? She is a victim of the ‘wrong’ feminism, that says, quite brutally, ‘Women can do whatever men can do’. Looking back over human history, why could they possibly *want* to? Invent the atom bomb? Organize the holocaust? Create the mindless or mechanical, unfulfilling jobs on which corporate capitalism ultimately depends? What is extraordinary, given Tsai’s subsequent work, which (*The Hole* aside, in its far simpler way) generally lacks this political thrust, is that *Vive l’Amour* was able to go so far.

Perhaps the film’s finest achievement is its extraordinary *poise*. The tone throughout is ironic, but the irony is never cruel or condescending, and we are never invited to feel superior to the characters. Are we watching comedy or tragedy?—both and neither, the two modes are here inseparable. The three characters exist within a culture without a past, and (in the words of Canada’s finest—and today shamefully neglected—filmmaker William Macgillivray), ‘If we lose the past we lose the future’. What is left, here in the West, of our cultural past, in our (alleged) civilization of the instantly disposable? For how many, today, are Mozart and Stravinsky, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Rembrandt and Klee (you can of course substitute your own list, and add philosophers and political thinkers) living presences, not mere names? Our universities (once the ‘storehouse of recorded values’) have dwindled into career training institutions. We hear people complaining—just as Lin, Ah Jung and Shiao-Kang might—on the one hand, that ‘there’s nothing to do’, on the other, that ‘we never have any time’. The future of corporate capitalism (and perhaps of our planet) depends upon that: we mustn’t have time to *think*. Perhaps we can read Lin’s interminable tears (which haven’t stopped when the film ends)—and the agonizing stretch of time Tsai insists that we sit and watch her cry—as the beginning of thought, or at least the necessary prelude to it?

Two of Tsai’s subsequent films have taken up the themes of *Vive l’Amour* with even greater explicitness: *The Hole* (his ‘millennium’ movie of the year 2000) gives us the ultimate breakdown of civilization; *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, set in a movie theatre on the eve of its closure, where no one watches the revival of a ‘historic’ movie, dramatizes in microcosm the desolation of a world without a past. Both are impressive works, but neither, for me, quite achieves the resonance, the complexity, or the poised ironic tone of *Vive l’Amour*.

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# Contraband

POWELL, PRESSBURGER, VEIDT, HOBSON, JUNGE AND OTHERS

BY TONY WILLIAMS

Compared to most films made by director Michael Powell and scenarist Emeric Pressburger, *Contraband* has received relatively little attention.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, it resembles their earlier collaborations tentatively exploring different forms of British cinematic traditions as in *The Spy in Black* (1939), *The 49th Parallel* (1941), and *One of our Aircraft is Missing* (1942) before their more challenging films such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) onwards. However, *Contraband* merges espionage thriller, German expressionism, American screwball comedy, and early sound UFA-influenced light romanticism in a manner anticipating the creative blurring of cinematic boundaries that the Archers excelled in. Their second collaboration reunited two stars from *The Spy in Black*. It also saw their first association with German art director Alfred Junge. *Contraband* has more than one reason for consideration as a key example of cinematic collaboration, an aspect Powell learned from his apprenticeship in the Rex Ingram Studios in Nice during the 1920s. It furnishes a case study for this issue's focus on "collaborations that might have been ongoing." Director, scenarist, and stars previously worked on *The Spy in Black*. In this sense *Contraband* is not actu-

ally a "one time effort". But its appearance at a particular historical moment in British cinema, during a time when British cinematic 1930s cross-cultural fertilization of European and Hollywood styles was still possible, also makes it a "one time effort." *Contraband* was released at the end of the "phony war" when the German Army advanced successfully into Western Europe. British cinema and society then adopted a more nationalistic and serious direction with Churchill offering the British people "blood, sweat, and tears" as the only reward for winning the war. Light-hearted espionage comedy thrillers such as *Contraband* now became impossible for British audiences experiencing Luftwaffe bombing raids.

*Contraband* appears not only as a "one time effort" in terms of style and theme but also a collaborative effort that "might have been ongoing" had cultural and historical circumstances been different. All key players contributed their own types of unique creative talent from particular cinematic backgrounds making *Contraband* a significant example of cultural collaboration during the time of its production. It contains many types of European sophisticated humor. However British wartime cin-



ema soon took on more serious concerns with less prestigious national comedies featuring Arthur Askey, George Formby, Will Hay, Frank Randle, Tommy Trinder and the Crazy Gang being the only exceptions to this rule.

### Michael Powell

Powell began his career working at the Rex Ingram Victorine Studios in Nice. While there he was not only able to observe the great Irish American director at work, but also see how a talent familiar with contemporary German and Hollywood cinema could mobilize professionally qualified technicians in a highly creative manner. Noting the collaborative involvement of scenarist Willis Goldbeck, editor Grant Whytock, stills photographer Harry Lachman, art director Henri Menessier, set designer Walter Pohlman, stars Alice Terry and Antonio Moreno all work-

ing on another adaptation of another novel by Vicente Blasco-Ibanez, whose *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* provided Ingram with his first major success, Powell (1987: 126) later wrote that Ingram "knew what he wanted from each shot, he was working with professionals who each knew what he wanted and he was prepared to wait until he got it." Following *Mare Nostrum* (1926), Powell collaborated with Ingram on *The Magician* starring Paul Wegener but felt the role should have gone to someone he would later work with. "I feel sure that Rex would have played Conrad Veidt in the part, if had not recently seen *The Golem* and then I should have met Connie at the time when he was reputed to be the most brilliant and the most interesting heterosexual in the German theatre." (154) After working on Ingram's last MGM silent, *The Garden of Allah*, Powell returned to England not only with a respect for the artis-

tic achievements of European and Hollywood cinema but also knowing the importance of working with collaborators who were at the top of their profession. It would take him a decade to achieve this goal. Until then, he continued to learn his trade, as stills photographer on Hitchcock's *Champagne* (1928), as well as working uncredited on *Blackmail* (1929) until he began directing quota quickies from 1931 to 1936. Some of these such as *Two Crowded Hours* (1931), *Hotel Splendide* (1932), *His Lordship* (1932), and *Lazybones* (1935) were comedies but designed more to showcase the local talents of British comedians and actors such as Jerry Verno and Ian Hunter. They lacked the sophistication of European comedies. Powell had to wait until that chance meeting with Emeric Pressburger in Alexander Korda's Denham Studios before he could explore this type of film. However, other films, such



TOP: Veidt and Hobson are playful

LEFT: Conrad Veidt



as *The Red Ensign* (1934) and *The Phantom Light* (1935) starring British comic character actor Gordon Harker, are not entirely devoid of German and Hollywood stylistic influences but they usually operate on crude and un-co-ordinated levels.

### **Emeric Pressburger**

Screenwriter Emeric Pressburger personified the best traditions of pre-Nazi UFA cinema as did Conrad Veidt. But his track record revealed a more secure grasp of that type of European sophisticated comedy characteristic of the "Lubitsch touch" than anything Powell had attempted. UFA employed Pressburger as contract writer. His first assignment was collaborating on the screenplay for *Abschied* (1930) directed by Robert Siodmak. Pressburger then worked with Erich Kastner and Max Ophuls on the screenplay of Ophuls's first film *Dana Schon* (*Libertran*), the title of this lost film suggesting a comedy. As Kevin Macdonald points out, this period was as much a learning experience for Pressburger as the Ingram Studio was for Powell. Although critically lambasted due to their less serious light comedy and flimsy operetta nature, Macdonald (1994: 72) notes that these films "were certainly successful in their day, and were influential on the Hollywood cinema of the Thirties and Forties, if for no other reason than that many of the actors, directors, and producers who made them ended up in America after the rise of Hitler." However, Macdonald does not note that they were also influential on 1930s British cinema.

One of Pressburger's UFA associates was Reinhold Schunzel. Although barely remembered now for his role as Heydrich in Fritz Lang's *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) and the nervous Nazi in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), Schunzel was then a star director specializing in musical comedies as writer, actor, and director. During the early Weimar cinema period he had acted with Conrad Veidt in one of the first films pleading for tolerance towards gays—*Anders als die Andern* (1919) and *Die Sich Verkaufen* (1919), both directed by progressive Richard Oswald, as well as one of Veidt's rare ventures into the director's chair, *Wahnsinn* (1919). Schunzel later directed Veidt in *Der Graf von Cagliostro* (1920). MacDonald (87) notes that "Schunzel's light style" as a director was often favorably compared to Lubitsch" and he had acted in two of that director's early films. Pressburger first collaborated with Schunzel on his screenplay for *Der Kleine Sitensprung* (1931). This film starred Renate Muller, a vivacious German actress who would later die under tragic circumstances in 1937 following Nazi persecution. At the time, she was also an international star and had made three films in England—*Sunshine Susie* (1931), the UK version of *Die Privatsekretarin* (1931), and *Marry Me* (1932), the UK version of *Madchen zum Heiraten*. Schunzel directed Muller in eight films, the most well-known being *Viktor und Victoria* (1933) remade by Blake Edwards in 1982 with heterosexual James Garner playing the role originally performed by gay actor Anton Walbrook who would later become one of the Archer's collaborators. One scene actually reveals that Busby Berkeley may have borrowed his overhead camera choreographed chorus girl shot from this film.

Pressburger then collaborated with Schunzel on the screenplay of the director's *Ronny*, an operetta co-starring Hungarian actress Kathe von Nagy and dashing leading man Willy Fritsch who co-starred with Veidt and popular English operetta star Lilian Harvey in *The Congress Dances* (1931), a film regarded with abhorrence by Dr. Goebbels because of its unwholesome

lightweight Jewish features (see Soister: 2002, 227-231). These types of operetta with ironic overtones treating the battle of the sexes with amusement anticipated not only "The Archers's own playfully ironic operetta film, *Oh...Rosalinda!!*" (MacDonald, 90), but also the very structure of *Contraband*. Although no operetta, *Contraband* not only involves a gender war between Veidt's Captain Hardt and Valerie Hobson's Mrs. Sorensen but also uses a Danish military song containing the chorus "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" that functions strategically during several points of the film. Despite its lightweight character, these early German sound operettas provided sophisticated and stimulating roles for leading ladies such as Renate Muller, Kathe von Nagy, Magda Schneider (mother of Romy) and Luise Rainer that were worlds apart from Hollywood leading ladies and the English Rose archetype that Powell detested. Hobson's performance in *Contraband* owes much to this influence. These types of films did not last in Germany once the Nazis came to power. Anti-Jewish legislation led Pressburger into exile in France where he continued writing screenplays for films directed by fellow exiles Kurt Gerron, Karl Anton, and Robert Siodmak until he arrived in England in 1935 with a stateless British passport.

By contrast, (Guy, 105), some thirty films influenced by this sophisticated Viennese style appeared in England during the mid-1930s and virtually disappeared by 1938. Although Rick Altman (140) notes that the attraction of Viennese operetta had always been its "willingness to deal openly with society's favorite topic—sex, adultery, infidelity, innuendo, double entendre", the British versions of these films tended to be muted by comparison. For example, the Jessie Matthews version of *Viktor und Viktoria*, *First a Girl* (1935) tended to downplay the gender-bending naughtiness contained in the original and even Hitchcock had his own troubles with his only musical starring Jessie Matthews, *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934). By contrast, *Contraband* uses the Viennese influence by emphasizing sexuality in a far more accomplished manner using double-entendres and other devices that would escape the censor.

### **Conrad Veidt**

Although best remembered today for his roles as Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Major Strasser in *Casablanca* (1943), Conrad Veidt was one of the greatest talents of Weimar cinema and theatre. Although he appeared doomed to playing Nazis and villains in Hollywood cinema, Jerry C. Allen (1993: 336) points out that on the day of his death on April 3, 1943, "commercially and critically Veidt was in great demand and plans were in the offing for more roles for him." Had he lived, it is unlikely he would have been relegated to "making faces" as Peter Lorre once commented. One of Veidt's last Hollywood films was *Whistling in the Dark* (1941), a comedy-thriller in which he co-starred with Red Skelton similar to his teaming with British comic Hay Petrie in *Contraband*. Soister (2002: 302) speculates that Veidt could have appeared in post-war film noir and comedy roles had he lived. However, this anti-Nazi actor with a Jewish wife had to face the problem of adapting to a new country, like all exiles, (see Palmier) but also had to deal with changing his screen persona from the familiar Cesare, Student of Prague, and other sinister roles he was known for. Despite being an extremely versatile actor, Veidt had to avoid becoming stereotyped. He had overcome this in England and this is every possibility he would have succeeded in Hollywood. Like many talented Germans, he had gone Hollywood in 1926



appearing opposite John Barrymore in *The Beloved Rogue* playing Louis XI to the Great Profile's Francois Villon. Universal Studio head Carl Laemmle contracted him for three films, the most important being *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) directed by Paul Leni. But the arrival of sound and Veidt's limited command of English led him to return home until the Nazi regime forced him into exile. As Sue Harper (1998: 124) notes, the actor had to change his acting style in a manner whereby he abandoned his familiar Weimar cinema's demonic persona into becoming more charismatic. "Veidt shifted from representing deviant figures to marginal ones, which contained different social meanings. Harper and Gerd Gerdumund read his roles in films such as *The Wandering Jew* (1933), *Jew Suss* (1934), *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* (1935), and *King of the Damned* (1936) as representing allegories of the actor's now displaced position in British cinema and his identification with persecuted racial minorities such as Jews. However, important as these films are, they do not represent the entire spectrum of Veidt's talents<sup>2</sup>. He could perform comedy roles as his Metternich performance in *Congress Dances* shows. Harper (133) notes that when Korda signed a contract with Veidt in 1936, he "had difficulty finding the right roles for Veidt." In the January 1 1938 issue of *Film Weekly*, Veidt mentioned that he had only appeared in the 1937 films *Under the Red Robe* and *Dark Journey* as a favor to Korda. The great Weimar actor was clearly seeking to do some something different. His meeting with Powell and Pressburger led to *The Spy in Black* (1939), a film in which he played a doomed German U-Boat Commander but a role laced with humor and regret for the impossibility of breaching national and sexual boundaries (see Williams: 2000, 53-57). *Contraband* was to be a very different sea-change for Veidt.

#### Valerie Hobson.

Superficially, Valerie Hobson may resemble Powell's detested English Rose actress. She entered films at the age of 16, and invited to Hollywood in 1935, but after appearing in seven films, the most well-known being *The Werewolf of London* and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (both 1935), she returned to England disappointed with horror and thriller roles offered her, only to co-star with Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Alan Hale in the disappointing *Jump for Glory* (1937) directed by Raoul Walsh, before appearing in Alexander Korda's *The Drum* (1938), the first of many roles that appeared to define her according to Ephraim Katz (1994: 632) as "one of the prime leading ladies of the British screen, gentle, graceful, and elegant, the prime personification of the well-bred upper-crust English lady." This may be true of films such as *Great Expectations* (1946), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) and *The Card* (1951) but during 1939 she was capable of playing different roles. Powell (300) describes her as "a crisp young beauty whom I had admired from a distance" and who was facing "being asked to play the usual brainless, nerveless, boneless English heroine" in the original *Spy in Black* screenplay that Pressburger changed beyond recognition. In 1938, Hobson showed she could play a feisty heroine in *Q Planes* (1938), a performance foreshadowing her role in *Contraband*. Powell (306) mentions the first collaboration between actors, director, and scenarist evoking Howard Hawks's definition of having "fun" on a film. This certainly characterized their next involvement on *Contraband* especially with an actress Powell describes as "a tall, strong intelligent girl and a quick wit", an ideal Mrs. Sorensen.

#### Alfred Junge.

Despite often being overlooked in most standard accounts of film criticism, the role of the art director is indispensable for creating the visual mood of the film as much as the cinematographer. Alfred Junge began his career designing sets for the Berlin State Opera and Theatre before joining UFA as an art director in 1920. Towards the end of that decade he began working with E.A. Dupont after assisting Paul Leni on two key German expressionist films *Backstairs* (1921) and *Waxworks* (1924) the latter starring Conrad Veidt who would again work with Leni in the Hollywood production *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). Junge had also set designed *Salto Mortale* (1931) a Dupont film seeing the first screen appearance of Anton Wallbrook. In 1929, Junge moved to England with Dupont and eventually settled there. One of his most noteworthy films during 1934 was *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1934) directed by Alfred Hitchcock starring another Weimar exile Peter Lorre. Sarah Street (2008: 100-110) has noticed Junge's concept of Germanic "total design" in his sets for Dupont's *Piccadilly* (1929), Art Deco designs in Jessie Matthews's popular 1930s musicals, the integral aspect of lighting in set design as well as facilitating camera interaction with space in his mill design for Hitchcock's *Young and Innocent* (1937). Similar creative designs appear in *Contraband* and other Archers films.

*Contraband* is a film manifesting cross fertilization of talents behind and in front of the camera. Although the film has been compared to Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935), it displays no one direct influence but many derived from different cultural traditions, notably sophisticated UFA light romantic comedies well-known to Pressburger and Hollywood screwball comedy.

#### *Contraband* as Gourmet Collaboration

With all these talents involved, *Contraband* resembles a cinematic gourmet feast. It blends generic elements from different cultures designed to provide audiences with light entertainment during the period of the "phony war" that lasted from Britain's declaration of war in September 1939 against Nazi Germany to the beginning of the Battle of France on May 10 1940. Neville Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister and Winston Churchill replaced him. After location shooting in the East Coast area designed to show the operations of the Naval *Contraband* control as well as please the Admiralty for providing documentary propaganda, the unit moved to Denham Studios to construct scenes on board Andersen's ship as well as recreate London in blackout conditions for what Powell describes as "the first time in history that a blacked-out history had been put on the screen" (Christie, 27). Powell (339) appears to have regarded the film as "all pure corn, but corn served up by professionals and it worked." However, Valerie Hobson (Macdonald, 160-161) later remembered that the friendship she shared with Pressburger and Veidt influenced the screenplay resulting in certain "touches" such as The Three Vikings Restaurant recreating one the two stars often dined at in London. Veidt was also trying to break away from his sinister German image and appreciated the humane role Pressburger had written for him in *The Spy in Black* and relieved that he was now playing a Danish sea captain. Although Macdonald (161-162) regards Hitchcock comedy thrillers such as *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) as key influences—and they are certainly present as in the Nazi hideout location near a cinema as in *Sabotage* (1937)—early 1930s UFA comedies





*Contraband*

involving the battle of the sexes are more relevant. Both Hitchcock and Powell were very open to international influences. As Charles Barr (2005: 13) notes, these directors both looked outwards rather than inwards "learning from a wide range of international experiences, influences and collaborators, and also repeatedly dramatizing encounters between British and non-British characters." *Contraband* also displays its own "Lubitsch touch" owing much to the collaborative efforts of five major talents influenced by sophisticated UFA comedy thrillers and romantic entanglements.

This characterizes the relationship between Veidt's Captain Andersen and Hobson's Mrs. Sorensen. It not only resembles the Hollywood screwball comedy "attraction of opposites" seen in *Twentieth Century* (1934), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) but also lighthearted UFA films frowned upon by Dr. Goebbels. Hobson's Mrs. Sorensen is a rare creature in British cinema—a gay divorcee traveling between America and Denmark to see her child now in the custody of his Danish father. However, she is really Miss Clayton, an independent woman playing her own version of the "Great Game" in a manner undreamed of by John Buchan. When she refuses to wear her life-jacket in the opening scene, this begins a battle of the sexes that will not only be played on board ship but also in a blackout London concealing Nazi spies. As Ives points out, conventional gender roles become blurred in a film where language and movement play significantly prominent roles. When his disobedient passenger answers that she has never experienced being put into irons, Veidt responds in a sin-

ister manner evoking his role in *Dark Journey*. "No—I thought not. You would find it more uncomfortable than wearing a life jacket." This bondage metaphor becomes literal when they are both tied up together. He tells her, "I shall have to hurt you." She replies, "Go ahead." Hobson has to push on her ropes to facilitate his escape and Ives notes the implication. "As she induces pain in herself through quietly orgasmic sighs, Veidt's response is an equally orgasmic "good girl." Before he leaves, he kisses his bound lady in a manner evoking European sado-masochistic practices. When earlier searching her cabin, he suggestively sniffs her stockings in a very suggestive manner before he sees Mr. Pidgeon's cigar in an obvious phallic position. Veidt's Andersen then begins a quest to retrieve his masculine authority. But, as Ives notes, he finds himself without financial means of support leading Mrs. Sorensen to pay his bus fare. Earlier, Andersen nearly followed her into a Ladies toilet. Dialogue contains flighty innuendo representing that lost tradition of "naughty but nice" UFA comedies, to say nothing of the Lubitsch touch now transferred to Hollywood comedies such as *The Love Parade* (1929 and *Trouble in Paradise* (1932). She says, "Did you ever try being married? That can be quite an adventure." He replies, sighing, "Why do women always say that? Marriage ends adventure." She copies his sigh. "Why do men always say that?" *Contraband* ends with another installment of the battle of the lifejacket. It falls to the floor during an embrace and "The End" leaves plenty to the imagination suggesting that other things will also fall to the floor. As Steve Crook notes, *Contraband* is very risqué for 1940, a film having "hidden shal-



lows" or concealed sexy UFA comedy components.

The film blurs boundaries in many ways merging German expressionism with introductory documentary footage. Alfred Junge's designs blend Art Deco sets of his Jessie Matthews musicals with an actual working elevator moving from basement to ground floor rather than using shadows to suggest movement. This interacts with later light and shadow imagery employed by future acclaimed cinematographer Freddie Young. It resembles machine imagery of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and the opening scene of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1931). The female Nazi agent is named Miss Lang. The frequently reproduced still showing Veidt pointing his gun from behind the lift's grille in a menacingly German expressionist close-up is one of many examples of Junge's talent of integrating sets with lighting and camera work supporting Powell's tribute "that it is not sufficiently acknowledged that the art director is the creator of those miraculous images up there on the big screen, and that besides being a painter and an architect, this miracle man has to be an engineer as well." (343)

One negative review of *Contraband* on the *Internet Movie Database* describes the film as "camp expressionism." This is an unfair comment since it does not recognize how *Contraband* blurs many boundaries and not just male-female relationships. When imprisoned with Mrs. Sorensen, Andersen hears what he believes is the voice of a male singer playing a banjo. He later visits several nightclubs, one of which is "The White Negro Club" where white chorus girls perform alongside black painted male dancers. This scene was eliminated from the American version to avoid offending Southern sensibilities. But its presence emphasizes *Contraband*'s indebtedness to those UFA musical comedies that deliberately blurred boundaries on more than one level. Here racial and sexual boundaries merge in the same manner as the alliance between British and Danes led by a German actor with a Jewish wife (who identified himself as Jewish in an act of defiance to the Gestapo) and who was now a British citizen eternally grateful to a country that had rescued him from the Nazis in 1934 (see Allen, 218–215). Although initially advertised by DVD distributor Kino as "British film noir," *Contraband* blends German expressionism, film noir, Hollywood screwball comedy, and sophisticated 1930s UFA traditions in a highly imaginative manner. It deliberately aims to blur cultural boundaries in the same manner as *Archers* later did during the 1940s. Rather than finding a male singer he discovers instead a female with a masculine voice bearing a distinct resemblance to an actress appearing in later *Archers* films whom Powell's wife described as having "a touch of the lesbian" (see Powell: 1992: 95).<sup>3</sup> This is as near as the film can get to the world of *Viktor und Viktoria*. Andersen also recruits enlists a group of Rugby rowdies having a drunken dinner with their R.A.F. friends. One (Michael Shepley) utters Tarzan's Hollywood yell before engaging in Powell's version of a John Ford bar room brawl in a plush Art Deco nightclub. Terrified female musicians (modeled on the popular 1940s Ivy Benson All-Girl Band) flee in terror and we discover that their glamorous legs are nothing more than part of the set design. The Danish contingent mobilizes for battle with their British counterparts in a mock version of the hoped-for alliance between Britain and Denmark before the German Army May 10th advance into Western Europe quashed that possibility. They sing the Danish military song Andersen taught Mrs. Sorensen to sing at the Three Vikings in the manner of UFA operettas. This time, it forms a war cry with Danes combining

with British in a rugby scrum against the Nazis.

Nazi villain Van Dyne (Raymond Lovell) also represents a similar blurring of boundaries. He conceals his German accent beneath carefully constructed English pronunciation. Although ostensibly having lived in Denmark and America for some time, Mrs. Sorensen speaks in a definite English accent revealing that her assumed name actually conceals her real identity as Miss Clayton. The final battle between Andersen and Van Dyne occurs in a warehouse containing busts of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Andersen uses one to fell his foe, commenting "They always said he was tough." Despite Chamberlain's associations with the Munich agreement and appeasement, the line denotes less approval but rather emphasizes *Contraband*'s message that appearances can be deceptive.

*Contraband* received a trade showing on March 20 1940. It opened at London's Odeon Leicester Square to popular acclaim and went on general release during May when the phony war came to a sudden end. Afterwards things took a more serious concern. The Film section of the Ministry of Information decided to sponsor feature films as propaganda enabling the Archers to go to Canada "to prepare a film intended to alert American public opinion and counter isolationism" (Christie: 1978, 27). This would become *49th Parallel*. Veidt sailed to America taking prints of *Contraband* there for re-editing and re-titling as *Blackout*. He would never return to the country he became a citizen of in February 1939. His ashes were finally transferred to London's Golders Green Jewish cemetery on April 3rd, 1998. Valerie Hobson never again performed the type of light-hearted leading lady role of she did in *Contraband*. Alfred Junge left the Archers in 1948. He became the head of the art department of MGM's British studios until his retirement in the late 1950s. Powell and Pressburger's later career is too well-known to mention here. But *Contraband* is a film worthy of its title. Although critics such as Francois Truffaut mercilessly condemned British cinema (sometimes with good reason), this does not mean that it never exhibited cosmopolitanism. *Contraband* is a good example of a collaborative effort that could have been ongoing had not contemporary cultural and historical factors resulted in a more nationalistic type of cinema relevant to a wartime situation. It remains a good example of different cinematic styles and creative personnel collaborating at a particular historical moment displaying a potential that British cinema occasionally realized whenever rigid national boundaries dissolved.

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## Notes

- 1 Harper and Germunden dismiss *Contraband* in their respective articles choosing instead to concentrate on the British Veidt films they regard as more important. Alexander Ives's 2005 article in the CTEQ section of [www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com) represents a very welcome exception.
- 2 See Soister for a comprehensive survey of this actor's work. Veidt was actually an accomplished comedy actor as films such as *Liebe macht blind* (1925) and *Congress Dances* (1931) reveal. Although he does not sing in *F.P. 1 Doesn't Answer* (1932), his recording of the film's song *Where the Lighthouse Shines Across the Bay* was released commercially at the time and became a popular hit on English radio in 1980 leading to its re-release as a single. (See Allen, 175). His musical duet with Valerie Hobson in *Contraband* was not without precedent.
- 3 Note Powell's comment concerning their affair during the filming of *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945). "I loved her like a boy" (Powell: 1988, 479).





Loretta Young



Irene Dunne



John Wayne



Marlene Dietrich

# Collaborating Agent

## CHARLES FELDMAN AND CLIENTS

Charles Feldman fashioned a distinctive character for the role of the classical Hollywood agent. Dapper, gregarious, and All-Pro, Feldman sported an expansive demeanor, both in his business dealings and his social engagements in the world of Hollywood; his manner served him well. For if agents serve in the commercial fabrication of individuality, honing their clients into distinctive commodities, then agents also fashion their own sense of personality or character as a way of selling themselves.

BY TOM KEMPER

Agents represent a modern phenomenon not only in the sense that they spring from our era's complex integration of culture and industry—and this tension circulates throughout the agent's discipline, balancing the artistic needs of clients with those of business—but also in the sense that agents exemplify the modern practice of marketing personality, of selling one's self. In this regard, Feldman showed a profound interest in developing identities for his clients, tending to and even tailoring their unique talents and their own self-fashioning, whether by molding new roles for them, doting on their individual performances, stitching screenplays to embroider their particular skills, tactically weaving them into packages with other clients, or by generating proper recognition and attention for their roles in title sequences and advertising. To accomplish these goals, Feldman constructed his own distinguished persona within the industry: gentlemanly, charming, and learned.

Friends called him "Gable" for his rakish resemblance to the star. In all of his endeavors, Feldman played the courtly diplomat. Even at his most aggressive, a stance he did not shy from, Feldman took a dialectical approach to negotiations, hearing out the opposing side, while developing persuasive compromises or pinpointing holes in their positions that worked to the advantage of his clients<sup>1</sup>.

Over one hundred talent agencies operated in Hollywood at this time, so Feldman certainly had rivals, even with his stellar client list, which included Claudette Colbert, Michael Curtiz, Irene Dunne, and Warner Baxter, and other major box office attractions. Myron Selznick led the pack, along with his partner Leland Hayward. They managed the careers of Carole Lombard, Henry Fonda, William Powell, Leo McCarey, and many others. Feldman's career stands out for the strong creative advice he gave his clients and the dual role he played





Randolph Scott



Tyrone Power, *The Eddy Duchin Story*



Dana Andrews



Lauren Bacall

when he set up his own production company in the early 1940s. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Feldman carved out new deal strategies and paradigms that set competitive milestones for other agents. From the start, Feldman promoted a limited notion of freelancing through juggling nonexclusive contracts, signing clients to short contracts—two-film deals or two to three year studio terms—that allowed them to work at other studios simultaneously. No doubt harnessing his legal training, Feldman proved a probing reader of contracts and a nuanced writer of inventive provisions. This agent understood that contracts represented a process and a dialogue, not a final step, providing a platform for all parties to parse out terms and conditions favorable to both sides. In Feldman's hands, contracts became both more flexible and more rigorous, depending on his goals and the interests of his clients. In a business dependent on a complex network of contracts—between talent and studios, exhibitors and distributors—Feldman's career pres-

ents an alternative perspective on the so-called golden age of Hollywood, illustrating the numerous exceptions to this era's alleged adherence to the ironclad option contract. To illustrate this point, I want to take a few of Feldman's clients—John Wayne, Marlene Dietrich, Howard Hawks, and Lauren Bacall—and demonstrate the strong collaborative role he played in their careers and creative activities. Feldman's activity—consulting and advising clients, managing their selection of projects, and even collaborating with them on productions—illustrates some of the flexibility of the studio system. In this regard, managerial decisions extended beyond the studio walls and the moguls and could include figures like agents.

#### Saddling John Wayne: Dietrich Rides Again

In his later years, John Wayne feigned complete bafflement when he claimed that after all of his time in the film business, he still didn't know what an agent did. But Wayne knew all too well, for his relationship with Feldman spanned the richest period in the actor's career, lasting well into the 1960s and ripe with correspondence, consultations, conflicts, and consolations—no passing affair but a long-term meaningful relationship. Of course, admitting to a dependency on handlers like agents amounts to acknowledging a certain lack of independence, a chink in the armor of machismo Wayne wore with such confidence. Feldman played a strong role in navigating Wayne's access to stronger, richer material; in partnering the actor with creative personnel to accentuate and buttress his skills; and in gaining the actor industry attention and a degree of autonomy as his career developed. Acquiring Wayne in the late 1930s represented yet another one of Feldman's acts of thievery, so transparently that he wound up in courts over the infidelity. But Wayne's career strategy in the early 1940s typified Feldman's strategies in the synergy between his production company and his talent agency.

Marlene Dietrich, another one of Feldman's recent acquisitions, lured the young cowboy-actor into Feldman's stable—at least, according to Sam Morrison, Wayne's cuckolded agent at the time. In papers he filed with the Los Angeles Superior Court in October 1941, Morrison claimed that Dietrich had used "undue influence to weaken and undermine the mental capacity" of Wayne, leading the actor to abandon Morrison and flee to Feldman, while under the spell of Dietrich, Feldman's client and alleged emissary in this illicit enterprise. Morrison had lithely managed the young actor's career throughout the 1930s, as Wayne drifted in and out of minor roles in studio films and



Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, *Bringing Up Baby*



major roles in minor films. Tellingly, one mid-1930s article on agents mentions Morrison's office and passingly refers to a young actor John Wayne waiting impatiently to see his agent. When Wayne landed in Ford's *Stagecoach*—produced by Feldman's good friend Walter Wanger—his ambition, very likely, began to outweigh his patience with his agent. But this discrepancy only found expression, however, when Wayne encountered another species of his acting breed who had recently revamped her career by switching her representation to Feldman: Marlene Dietrich. This adulterous agency tale, like any good melodrama, requires some backstory.

Feldman roped Dietrich as a client in 1938, long after her reign as a genuine star in films such as *The Blue Angel*, *The Scarlet Empress*, and *Shanghai Express*, even while some of these films met with decidedly mixed commercial and critical responses. By the decade's end—and possibly the end of a career—Dietrich's allure melted into "box office poison," according to exhibitors, who placed a full-page ad declaring so in 1937, her temptation-tangled delivery grown tired and campy—particularly in a period dominated by earthy, vernacular actresses like Feldman's own Claudette Colbert and Irene Dunne.

Dietrich entered Feldman's orbit through one of the many innovative production set-ups the agent Feldman explored in the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> In 1938, Feldman had entered into discussions with Universal's Joe Pasternak about a potential production partnership, wherein the producer, Feldman, Feldman's associate Ralph Blum, and Henry Koster would form "a great 'United Artists' type of set-up."<sup>3</sup> While this grand design never materialized, Feldman became a regular provider of talent to Pasternak's Universal productions. Both Pasternak and Feldman recognized the potential for Marlene Dietrich to return to the

screen. Feldman felt that her films needed to balance out Dietrich's exoticism by regularizing her material, by replacing, for example, the phony veils and European lighting that surrounded her earlier image with robust American settings, genres, and characters. Feldman's pitch, ever alert to the ways in which stars represent constructions—that is, objects shaped by the screenplay, the co-stars, the production quality of films—as much as real figures (real personalities, looks, and talent), convinced the cautious actress. Selling Dietrich on this game-plan, Feldman sold her on his agency as well. He immediately set her up in Pasternak's *Destry Rides Again*, a comedic but rugged little western. Cast as a saucy French salon owner and free of European silky cobwebs, the film surrounded Dietrich with a spirit of the frontier, and an American love interest in Jimmy Stewart. Off her pedestal, Dietrich proved equally sure-footed in the pioneer's dust.

Feldman repeated this formula in her follow-up film, *Seven Sinners* (1940), with the pioneer spirit transformed into a no less solidly American Navy drama. In fact, Feldman developed the screenplay through his production division and with his screenwriter clients. With Jimmy Stewart tied up in another production, Feldman naturally turned to one of his own clients, Tyrone Power. Feldman had purchased Power's contract in 1938 for \$30,000 from agent Ruth Collier (Dana Andrews came over from Collier as well in another deal); Power refused the role and went off to make a series of films for Feldman pal Darryl Zanuck at Fox.<sup>4</sup> Feldman then turned to another "client," John Wayne, now consulting with Feldman, but still contractually tied to Morrison.

Having performed this little combination on *Seven Sinners*, Feldman next paired Dietrich and Wayne in two more of his

*Stagecoach*







Marlene Dietrich, *Seven Sinners*

screenplay properties, *The Spoilers* and *Pittsburgh*, both in 1942. Feldman's emphasis on controlling one's career by independently selecting projects impressed both Dietrich and Wayne. It pushed Wayne to work on his persona more actively—his notorious gait, his delayed delivery, his pose—an attentive tailoring and self-consciousness encouraged by Dietrich during their short relationship on (and off) the set of the Feldman productions. To Wayne, Dietrich represented an example of a performer calculating the careful construction of a consistent and coherent screen persona and always retaining a strong say in her career, even when she followed Feldman's advice. Hitherto an actor who stumbled through roles as they came to him, Wayne recognized the importance of building a persona by selecting roles carefully and establishing a certain continuity to his characterizations, even as the roles shifted in different films. One couldn't rely entirely on agents—Wayne understood that much through his frustrations with Morrison—even those as responsive and committed as Feldman; actors needed to show a commitment to their career. Thus, Wayne took a greater interest in the development of scripts and the overall production process. At the core of this new approach, Feldman aided and abetted Wayne in this direction.

Feldman played a strong role in shaping these films as a producer and his role as agent to these stars here merged indistinguishably from his role as a producer. For example, on *Pittsburgh*, Feldman scrutinized the film editor's various versions with keen attention to the treatment of his star-clients. In demanding new cuts and re-shoots, Feldman added numerous close-ups of his stars. "See that the cameraman is instructed to really make a gorgeous shot of" Dietrich's entrance, Feldman dictated in notes for a re-shoot:

**We have rewritten and are rewriting further the scene (which is a retake) in the early part of the picture,**

**where Wayne comes in to Dietrich and she is in a sort of negligee.... We hope to change this scene so that it will be a very, very important emotional scene for her, so that at the finish of the scene there will be a complete capitulation on her part, and the audience will unqualifiedly know that she is desperately in love with Wayne.<sup>5</sup>**

Of course, Feldman's shaping of the film completely paralleled his reshaping of Dietrich's persona, calculating audience sympathy for the character. This kind of vulnerability, the exposure of weakness, worked against, if not erased, the calculating, hypnotic and powerful roles Dietrich played in her early films. Collapsing in emotional vulnerability solicited audience sympathy for the actress, especially in the consistent way Feldman had shaped these roles for Dietrich.

The resurrection of Dietrich's star persona in these films rubbed off on Feldman's other client, John Wayne, doubling the service value (to the agency and its clients: Randolph Scott, their costar, was also an agency client) of these productions. In the publicity material for these films—Feldman hired the publicist with Universal foot-

ing the bill—Feldman consistently emphasized Wayne's association with John Ford and kept the focus on his recent films, especially the critical and commercial success of *Stagecoach*, even if Randolph Scott, the other Feldman client sharing the bill with Dietrich and Wayne in these offerings, garnered slightly more attention. Still, in a memo to Universal's marketing director, Feldman advised the studio to play up Dietrich and Wayne in the advertising (did Feldman act here as the film's producer or as his client's agent?). Dietrich's "new wave of popularity" received equal emphasis. Amongst the mainly favorable reviews, all of which treated the films as modest but successful entertainment vehicles, the *Hollywood Reporter* noted of *The Spoilers* that its "apt casting is a tribute to the Charles K. Feldman group plan."<sup>6</sup> To capitalize on such industry attention, Feldman took out ads emphasizing the agency's clients in these productions.

Wayne consulted with Feldman as soon as he met the agent on *Seven Sinners*. Given Feldman's close relationship with Walter Wagner, the producer of Wayne's 1939 film *Stagecoach*, Feldman and Wayne may have crossed paths even earlier. However, Morrison still retained an agency contract on Wayne at that time. *Stagecoach* seemed to catch Morrison by surprise; the agent's surviving scrapbook, while spilling over with articles and pictures of lesser clients, only showed evidence of his relationship with Wayne during the year of *Stagecoach*, when suddenly page after page featured clippings, reviews, and advertising featuring his client, including *Seven Sinners*; then Wayne disappeared from the Morrison's book.

In 1932, Wayne had signed a five-year contract with Morrison and renewed his contract in 1936 for another five years, commencing June 4th, 1937.<sup>7</sup> Under Morrison's stewardship, Wayne signed a contract with B-movie studio Republic, a standard document giving Wayne \$3000 per picture through 1943. But 1939's *Stagecoach* changed the picture. The success





Randolph Scott and Marlene Dietrich, *Pittsburgh*

of this film and Wayne's starring role in the production fueled Wayne's dissatisfaction with his career and his agent. When Wayne moved on to Wanger's friend Feldman's productions he became increasingly unhappy that Morrison failed to exploit the actor's new success. Wayne stopped paying commissions to Morrison on July 31, 1941. Feldman's internal office memos reveal that Feldman was already looking for new roles for Wayne and for ways to restructure his Republic contract. As Wayne explained to SAG in October 1941, for years he had been dissatisfied with Morrison. This relationship, Wayne complained, was "so unsatisfactory to me that I was compelled to negotiate on my own behalf....and such negotiations, on at least two occasions [very likely the Universal films with Feldman] resulted in my obtaining in excess of the offers obtained by Leo Morrison." Wayne's actions, his dealings with Feldman and his dispute with Morrison, spawned further conflicts. SAG chastised Morrison for taking the matter to court, preferring, like many institutions in the industry, to handle such disputes on their own turf and on their own conditions. Dietrich also filed letters with SAG that reputed Morrison's allegations regarding her role in the switch and denied any knowledge of Wayne's agent. She encouraged SAG to put pressure on Morrison to drop the suit because of the unfavorable publicity and mentioned the SAG-AMG franchise and that one of its purposes was to handle such conflicts. SAG helped resolve the situation by the end of 1941. In this agreement, Wayne continued to pay Morrison commissions solely on the Republic contract and nothing else. But this did not stop Feldman from setting out to renegotiate Wayne's deal with Republic.

Indeed, within a few years, Feldman completely restructured Wayne's Republic deal: one picture a year for five years on a basis of a \$100,000 advance against ten percent of the gross.<sup>8</sup> The deal also guaranteed picture budgets of at least eight hundred thousand dollars, an impressive figure for the studio

(although the B-movie company was enjoying, like the rest of Hollywood, the bountiful WWII years). More importantly, the deal granted Wayne a producer status on selected productions—an increasingly typical move in Feldman's negotiations in the 1940s.

One of the key films in Wayne's gradual ascension to stardom remains 1944's *Tall in the Saddle*. As Gary Willis has noted, *Tall in the Saddle* marks a transformation in Wayne's on-screen persona, providing "a first glance at what would be Wayne's later persona."<sup>9</sup> But Feldman's fingerprints are all over this film, even though neither he nor Wayne produced this film. Director client Edward L. Marin (brother too of Ned Marin, vice-president of Feldman's agency) helmed the film. It was produced by Robert Fellows, who worked as an associate producer under Feldman on *Pittsburgh*—Wayne and Fellows first met on the set of *Seven Sinners*—and later joined Wayne's production company. The film also starred Ella Raines—borrowed from Universal—a client who came to Hollywood as a protégé of Feldman client, Charles Boyer (Feldman placed her under contract with Boyer's independent production company, which loaned her out for productions).<sup>10</sup>

One of Wayne's most formative and influential collaborators—on this film and subsequent productions—also came from Feldman's stable: client Paul Fix. Wayne worked closely on developing his acting with coaching and constructive commentary by Fix, another actor from *Pittsburgh*, and an aspiring screenwriter, a career path also managed by Feldman. Wayne consulted with Fix as he shaped the *Saddle's* main character around Wayne's strong points as an actor. This practice fit Feldman's notion of carefully tailoring roles to define a star's persona. Moreover, Feldman client Loretta Young (a recent acquisition from Selznick's agency) suggested Fix as Wayne's acting coach. "Duke was bright enough," Fix said, "but he didn't know how to move, what to do with his hands, and after



three lines he was lost." Wayne and Fix worked out a set of signals for steering Wayne's performance from the sidelines. For example, when Wayne was overdoing the famed "furrowing" of his brow, Fix would put his own hand to his head. "I was on the set with Duke for years and nobody ever caught on." A few did: Wayne and Fellows—through Feldman—later put Fix under contract to their production company. Fix's contributions, then, did not end with the screenplay. He shaped the character to Wayne's persona, as the actor and Fix refined it. And, since Fix advised Wayne on the set, he contributed to shaping Wayne's performance as well (Fix also played a small role in the film)—once again, Feldman played matchmaker for his clients.

Granting Wayne a degree of autonomy in his producing deal at Republic magnified the agency's role in trolling for material for their client. In fact, Feldman's agency picked up the *Tall in the Saddle* story for Wayne through an agent at the Small agency. Feldman's agent worked out a deal that granted Wayne a three-day option on the material—a *Saturday Evening Post* serial—during "which time John Wayne will endeavor to set up a deal with a studio" to purchase the story at the asking price of \$15,000.<sup>11</sup> The short selling window likely indicated confidence that Wayne would quickly set up the story with Republic. But the memo revealed how much and how early Wayne remained in control of the project; at the same time, the memo recorded the role the agency played in scouting material in its developmental form for Wayne to work with and shape into serviceable vehicles for his talent.

To the industry at large, Wayne's work as a producer confirmed his growing sense of the control over his career. Almost every review of 1947's *The Angel and the Badman*, and usually at the start of the review, noted Wayne's status as a producer on the film. Furthermore, Feldman orchestrated rounds of interviews and publicity around Wayne highlighting his new production deal and noting his roles with Dietrich. While *Angel* qualified as a genre film, Wayne's first project as a producer marked a certain level of ambition. Some critics noted this distinction in that the film's narrative portrayed Wayne's gradual dismissal of the life of violence. The *Los Angeles Times* review called it "very probably Republic's sweetest western; it is certainly one that no other studio would disdain," thereby elevating the film above the studio's typical fare. The *Hollywood Reporter* noted, in a full-page survey, that *Angel* received great reviews from New York critics, regionally isolated as highbrow country. One New York critic noted that "producer Wayne has seen to it that actor Wayne gives a good performance," a split-identity emphasizing the dual dimensions that distinguished Wayne's new persona. This perspective perfectly chimed in with Feldman's strategies in burnishing Wayne's new charisma in the industry. Even while this critic noted, as many did, that the film dragged, his critique remained consistent with Wayne's new image: "actor Wayne should have pointed out to producer Wayne that the picture is too talky, moves too slowly and runs too long for what is still, after all, a western." This ventriloquist critical mockery nonetheless adheres to Wayne's dual roles and his new status. Noting this distinction served Wayne in that it signified control over his career and roles. This perspective transformed Wayne into a productive entity (a producer), not merely a passive actor—and served to heighten his aura.

Years earlier, a 1941 magazine profile of Wayne referred to him as "the fastest-moving leading man among the come-

uppers on the Coast," and particularly emphasized his co-starring gigs with Marlene Dietrich, cashing in Wayne's association with a bona fide star. Many of these stories played up Wayne's appearance in *Stagecoach* and his friendship with John Ford, a tactic that again associated Wayne with A-list talent, thereby raising Wayne's profile in the industry. A Hedda Hopper article repeated the Ford-Wayne relationship in terms of Wayne's producing career, with Herbert Yates—always a collegial business associate of Feldman's—the Head of Republic Studios, calling Wayne a potential triple threat: producer, actor, and director—an exaggeration of the deal terms heartily participated in for public relations and a studio head seeking to flatter one the studio's most important assets.

By 1944, Wayne cracked the box office top twenty-five—at twenty-four—and climbed steadily to the top by the end of the decade. Wayne's careerist escalation coincided with Feldman's resuscitation of Marlene Dietrich, and, in characteristic fashion, Feldman merged these two professional projects—Wayne's reconstruction and Dietrich's resurrection. From Feldman and Dietrich, Wayne learned to take more command of his career: through advice on his performance, his manners, his delivery, and careful selection of roles and stories, and greater leeway to exercise such practices through the control granted in contracts. Directly and indirectly, Feldman played a role in all of these areas, and pushed the actor into new professional and contractual terrain in the years to come.

### The Big Deal: Howard Hawks and Lauren Bacall

In 1940, Charles Feldman added Howard Hawks to his agency's stable of powerful directors, and to his own independent production enterprises. Hawks's astute biographer, Todd McCarthy, considered the relationship "the most important professional association" of Hawks' life.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the opportunities offered for independent productions at this time indirectly led Hawks to Feldman. When Hawks's brother, who had previously managed the director's career, bolted the agency business to strike up a production deal, Hawks moved over to Feldman's agency (in a literal sense, since the two agencies had occupied the same office building). Here Hawks fell into step with Feldman's independent production planning, his penchant for juggling overlapping contracts, and for packaging clients. Both Hawks and Feldman, in fact, managed the career of their mutual discovery, Lauren Bacall. Feldman's handling of Bacall demonstrated yet another example of the strategic merging of his production company and his talent agency. It also revealed his skills as an agent, aptly demonstrating his attentive devotion to the various facets—from contractual advice to aesthetic criticism (his sensitivity to the screenplays of her films and to her performances)—of a client's career, facets that go beyond merely servicing contract negotiations.

Hawks' agency move came at an opportune moment. Feldman had just fielded a call from Jesse Lasky seeking Lewis Milestone (who left Selznick for Feldman) or George Stevens for his production (arranged through a Warner Bros. deal) of *Sergeant York*, the true story of the great World War I hero. With those directors already engaged, Feldman handily offered up Hawks' services. By 1939, Hawks had earned a strong reputation in the business, with major films like *Scarface*, *Only Angels Have Wings*, and *His Girl Friday* to his credit. Convincing Lasky of Hawks' suitability took no time, then. Feldman worked real magic in the accompanying deal-points. Feldman negotiated





Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, *The Big Sleep*

an \$85,000 salary for Hawks—a moderately impressive figure—but also stipulated that the studio credit the film as “A Howard Hawks Production” on advertising and in the title sequence—this, despite the fact that Lasky remained the film’s producer (he had brought the project to Warner Bros.) and Hawks came to the pre-production planning fairly late in the game. No matter. Through Feldman’s deal, the film would be known as a Hawks production, insuring industry recognition for his client. With the film’s overwhelmingly successful commercial and critical run Feldman’s work paid off. Feldman parlayed this success into a \$100,000 directing job for Hawks on Goldwyn’s independent production *Ball of Fire*, and in less than a year, Feldman sat at the table with Warner Bros. negotiating a semi-independent production deal for Hawks.

While certain details of this 1942 deal would be re-negotiated at various times over its duration, it nonetheless established the framework for a productive period in Hawks’s career. The initial terms guaranteed Hawks’s services on one picture per year for five years at a directing fee of \$100,000 on each film.<sup>13</sup> The deal granted Hawks story choice, a production credit, and nonexclusive services. In Feldman fashion he also negotiated a concurrent deal for Hawks at Universal, commanding the director a \$100,000 fee on three pictures over three years, but with a promise of 50% of the net profits. At Warner Bros. the advertising and title sequences would read “A Howard Hawks Production,” in 40% font, while the same moniker would

appear on the Universal films at 75%. At the same time, Feldman continued to pursue other deals; at RKO, for example, Feldman came close to selling the studio on an independent production deal (partnered with Gary Cooper).<sup>14</sup>

The original Warner Bros. contract stipulated Hawks as a director for two specific projects, *Battle Cry* and *Dark Eyes*, from two literary properties owned by Feldman and Hawks. Hawks wanted to start the second picture soon after the first one. With two semi-independent commitments—to Warner Bros. and Universal—running concurrently, Feldman sought to protect Hawks’s independence by writing firm start dates into the contract, obliging Warners to Hawks’s salary regardless of whether or not the studio was prepared to start production. This foreclosed the possibility of Warners tying up Hawks’s time and services in delays. In addition, Feldman tallied up ten more salaried weeks to the contract for an extra \$30,000. Feldman could have increased the overall salary but the profit percentages made this deal worth the risk. As Feldman explained, “Naturally there must be an element of gamble on Hawks’s part, inasmuch as there are considerable percentages involved on both pictures.” Hawks was to receive twenty percent of the net profits up to a gross of \$3 million and thirty percent thereafter. Feldman also convinced the studio to pay Hawks’s agency commissions directly to Feldman’s office but Warners was allowed to deduct the commission amount from the recoupable elements, meaning that the studio recovered these



costs before they began distributing percentages to Hawks and Feldman-Hawks' production company.

Struggling with the development of their first screenplay, in August 1943, Feldman and Hawks substituted *To Have and Have Not* for *Battle Cry*, with Warners authorizing and reimbursing Hawks to purchase the rights to this Hemingway novel (from Feldman's frequent business associate Howard Hughes). As one more component to this complicated deal, the contract stipulated that Warners would guarantee Bogart's services to start production by December 1st, 1943. Feldman's old business partner, Sam Jaffe, also Bogart's agent, failed to make any appearance in these negotiations, leaving Bogart a mere contract player throughout all of these negotiations, a pawn, albeit a well-paid one, in the power-plays between Feldman, Hawks, and Warners. Ann Sheridan was also mentioned in some of the original contracts and deal memos—until Feldman introduced a young unknown into the picture: Betty Bacall.

Feldman "discovered" the teenager Betty Bacall (renamed Lauren) through his association with Hawks, whose wife brought the young model to the attention of Howard and his agent.<sup>15</sup> The young teen had no acting experience; but Hawks recognized a potential talent. Feldman signed her to contracts both with his talent agency and his production company, Hawks-Feldman Productions, in May, 1943. Feldman the agent, then, negotiated the following deal for his client: Hawks-Feldman Productions would have "the right, but not the obligation, to use the services of the artist in two pictures during each contract year." When Warner Bros. finally became convinced of her promise, the studio wanted a piece of her contract, if the studio agreed to use her for this picture—a prospect involving another separate round of negotiations.

In May the following year, Feldman, acting as her agent, negotiated a simultaneous contract with Warner Bros., splitting the services of Bacall between the studio and Hawks' production company: "Warners has all obligations under the contract and the right to two pictures during each contract year." Feldman the agent insisted that Warners could not assign or loan out the artist whatsoever, a contractual term heavily disputed by Warners through extended negotiations. However, Feldman allowed Hawks' production company to loan out Bacall, a somewhat natural consideration for an independent production company with an inherently limited slate of films.

In late 1943, when it became clear that Bogart would not be available until January, Feldman reiterated to Jack Warner the importance of securing a starting date, since failing to do so could interminably hold up Hawks, impinging on his long-term schedule in a way that might prevent him from moving on to new deals or render him unavailable for other assignments. This move underscored the importance of negotiating salaried starting dates through threat of penalty, regardless of the film's actual start of production. By itself, this contractual obligation to pay out a salary on a film yet to start production sounded absurd, since it amounted to paying a director to essentially wait for production to begin. But this commitment retained a key strategic tactic. It raised the stakes, contractually forcing a studio's interest in starting a production, thereby guaranteeing that a client's time would not be squandered and protecting the client's availability for other deals. For clients with leverage like Hawks, Feldman always negotiated such guarantees.

*To Have and Have Not* proved to be a terrific hit for Warner Bros., and Hawks was eager to work with Bogart and Bacall

again. So Feldman and Hawks reworked the deal to bring in a property they owned—the rights to Raymond Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep*—and set up a new production, with their company taking in 20% of the gross. To protect his cut, Hawks worked quickly and efficiently on the shoot.

At the end of production on *The Big Sleep*, Feldman paired Bacall with client Charles Boyer in *Confidential Agent*, a routine spy thriller that garnered bad reviews. Bacall's wooden performance in particular drew negative critical attention. When Feldman saw test screenings of *The Big Sleep*, he went into rescue mode. Feldman sent a carefully argued memo to Jack Warner imploring the studio to re-shoot scenes. He framed his appeal—clearly protecting the exchange value of his commodity, Bacall—to Warner as a matter of protecting the studio's own assets (both Bacall and the film itself). Feldman's memo illustrated the power agents retained, in terms of their reputation, in persuading studios to consider their arguments and creative contributions. Moreover, the memo demonstrated the powerful syndicate operating as part of the classical studio system as it accentuated Feldman's embedded role in the production process; for here an agent played a strong consulting role as much as the executives working within the studio walls:

Dear Jack:

You will recall that during the filming of *The Big Sleep* I came to your house and urged you to make retakes with Bacall. You allowed Howard [Hawks] to make three or four days additional scenes with some retakes. After viewing the picture in its entirety I asked you again to re-do the scene where Bacall wears a veil but in the last analysis you allowed the scene to stay in.

Before the retakes were made I suggested to Howard, and in two or three instances he followed my suggestions, that he give Bacall certain scenes that were previously shot with the butler and made other substitutions of a similar nature. All of the foregoing I did because I felt Bacall only had a "bit" in the picture.

After reading the write-ups in the New York papers, Jack, and the general comments regarding the girl with which you are probably familiar by now, I urge you (and that is the reason for this letter) to view the film again with the following in mind:

Make whatever photographic retakes are necessary and by all means re-do the veil scene.

Give the girl at least three or four additional scenes with Bogart of the insolent and provocative nature that she had in *To Have and Have Not*. You see, Jack, in *To Have and Have Not* Bacall was more insolent than Bogart and this very insolence endeared her in both the public's and the critic's mind when the picture appeared. It was something startling and new. If this could be recaptured through these additional scenes with Bacall and Bogart, which frankly I think is a very easy task, I feel the girl will come through for you magnificently.

Bear in mind, Jack, that if the girl receives the same type of general reviews and criticisms on *The Big Sleep* [regarding the bad reviews for *Confidential Agent*] which she definitely will receive unless changes are



made, you might lose one of your most important assets. Though the additional scenes will only cost in the neighborhood of probably \$25,000 or \$50,000, in my opinion this should be done even if the cost should run to \$250,000. I am writing this note to you as a friend and trust that you will not think that I presume to tell you how to run your business.

Rushing to see a show so had dictated this letter without rereading same.<sup>16</sup>

Unbeknownst to Feldman, three weeks before receiving this memo, Warner had decided to rush *The Confidential Agent* into theatrical release because, as Warner's internal memo claimed, he thought that Bacall was "about a hundred times better in 'Confidential' than she is in 'Big Sleep.'" But four days after receiving Feldman's letter, Warner recalled all prints of *The Big Sleep* in circulation. A few days later, Warner authorized the retakes, as well as re-editing the film. Comparing the two versions, one can see that the retakes followed Feldman's advice to the tee.<sup>17</sup> Three months later, Warner wrote in an in-house memo that sneak previews confirmed that "this new version which has scenes protecting Bacall comes off great, and in my opinion we have one hundred percent better picture."

Feldman's rendering of Bacall's star persona displayed a keen capacity for formal analysis (as sharp as any film critic). His perceptive observations about the conflicts woven into the charmed forces between Bacall and Bogart—like the push and pull of magnetic attraction—in *To Have and Have Not* show an ear alert to the subtler dynamic forces in dialogue. Moreover, Feldman's observations revealed an awareness of the ways in which particular personalities in character roles were layered into the creation of a star persona. In other words, star personas were not only associated with the roles stars played, but with the personality characterizing these roles, a personality creating a certain continuity to the roles. This continuity could be—and it is in successful careers—appropriated by stars as their own. So while stars certainly shaped their persona through aspects of their own personality (traits, of course, constructed by coaches, acting lessons, voice-training, rehearsal, and choreography), the screenplays contributed to the formation of star personas to a large degree. This statement is not just a theoretical observation, as Feldman's memo evinced. But Feldman's memo also revealed his own understanding of the creative construction of a star, a sharp analytical capacity that showed some of the creative intelligence underscoring his career as an agent.

Furthermore, Feldman's memo clearly articulates how cultural forces—in this case, attention to well-honed dialogue—translated into increased capital value. This example extended beyond the simple issue of selecting the right roles in order to assure a more lucrative career. It involved protecting Bacall's persona by rewriting dialogue and character in an already completed film. In this sense, the memo translated into prose, conversations that happened all the time over the appropriateness of certain roles or films in relation to the long-term career of the star. Feldman (and other agents) consulted consistently with his clients in this fashion, fretting over films, weighing a project's short-term benefits (salary, location, etc) for clients against its larger impact on their career. Other memos and phone notes indicate the same kind of advice and confirm that such creative consultation characterized Feldman's sage counsel. Feldman—

and other agents like him—then didn't simply measure film projects by the monetary value to their clients. Acting as an agent required knowledge of the ways in which films (even the choice of films for directors and musicians) built—brick-by-brick—a client's persona. Feldman's legal background trained him to read the tricks and traps of obtuse contracts and to create contractual tricks of his own. But agents also needed the kind of savvy for the medium and its formal aspects—dialogue, performance, pacing—demonstrated in Feldman's memo on Bacall—in other words, a balance of formal and financial analytical acuity. And, of course, as revealed in this memo, formal analysis potentially translated into financial rewards. Favoring the monetary attractions of a potential project over its effect on a career meant risking that very career's longevity, thereby risking future earnings—financial and formal analysis were then strongly linked and could not be so easily separated. Feldman's advice was rooted in making *The Big Sleep* a better film. But this concern conflated with a concern for the long-term benefits of continuing a client's career.

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This article contains excerpts from *Hidden Talent: The Emergence of Hollywood Agents*, by permission of University of California Press.

## Notes

- 1 Biographical background and perspective provided by Ernest Havemann, "Package of Stars" (*Life*, April 17, 1950), Willard L. Wiener, "Charmer for a Nice Fee" (*Collier's*, August 6, 1949), select personal correspondence (in particular see Feldman's long letter to a writer for an unpublished profile dated October 16, 1946), and Feldman's own biographical information provided in a draft for the American Historical Company, Inc., all found in Folders 1888a, 1991, 1992, and 1993 in the Charles K. Feldman Papers (CKF hereafter), in the American Film Institute's (AFI) Louis B. Mayer Library (formerly the Charles K. Feldman library! Money still counts the most in Hollywood; Feldman was honored by the library after donating his files to the organization; Mayer trumped this title when his family donated money). A more recent profile can be found by Peter Biskind in "The Man Who Minted Style" (*Vanity Fair*, April 2003).
- 2 Feldman's short-lived merger with the Edington-Vincent agency, Dietrich's former representatives, may have presented their first official association.
- 3 Folder 878, CKF.
- 4 On Power's deals and Dana Andrews, see "Contract Briefs" folders, CKF.
- 5 Folder 666, CKF.
- 6 "The Spoliars," Clippings files, AMPAS.
- 7 Background on Wayne's relationship with Morrison, the lawsuit with Feldman, SAG correspondence, and depositions can be found in Folder 1919, CKF. All subsequent references and details stem from this folder.
- 8 Folder 1919, CKF.
- 9 Gary Wills, *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 139.
- 10 For details on Raines' contracts, see Folders 49, 50, 51, CKF.
- 11 Folder 1919, CKF.
- 12 Todd McCarthy, *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove, 1997), p. 319.
- 13 Folder 593, 595, and 596, CKF. All subsequent references and citations on the Hawks-Warner Bros. deal stem from these folders.
- 14 Folders 875 and 876, CKF.
- 15 Folder 594, CKF. All subsequent references to Bacall stem from this folder, unless otherwise noted.
- 16 This document, and others related to the Bacall narrative, can be found in Folder 1907, CKF. But some of the key memos can be found most easily in Rudy Behlmer's edited collection, *Inside Warner Bros.: 1935-1951* (New York: Viking, 1985), pp. 248-250.
- 17 In 1996 Bob Gitt of the UCLA Film & Television Archives restored the earlier version, now available on wonderful DVD with the later release. A special feature on the DVD compares both versions of the films (and cites Feldman's letter).



# Body and Soul

JOHN GARFIELD, ABRAHAM POLONSKY  
AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY

BY STUART HANDS

Hollywood movie star John Garfield was born Jules Jacob Garfinkle on March 4, 1913 to Russian and Ukrainian Jewish immigrants living in a two-room tenement on Rivington Street of New York's Lower East Side. These ethnic working class roots would continually be associated with his star persona. While working at Warner Bros, most of his screen roles would follow the mould of the ethnic street tough defined by the likes of James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson.<sup>1</sup> But in four films made after the war—*Humoresque* (1946), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Body and Soul* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948)—Garfield portrayed specifically Jewish men. Although only two of these films would specify his character's Jewish roots, all four can be easily read as Jewish texts at least by the nature of the characters' family relations, the characters' predilection toward social collectivity as well as clues provided by occasional Yiddish inflections spoken by secondary characters and locales such as the Lower East Side.

With John Garfield, left-wing novelist, playwright, screenwriter and director Abraham Polonsky would make two moral parables—*Body and Soul* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948)—dealing with the need for ethnic/Jewish working class and family solidarity and the personal corruption caused by social mobility within the world of American capitalism. Mainly through a close reading of *Body and Soul*, this article will focus on two aspects of this first collaboration: First, I will discuss how it revitalized the structure and conventions of the earlier Hollywood depictions of the Jewish family that were defined during the silent era. *Body and Soul* (as well as Garfield's version of *Humoresque*, made a year earlier) revisits the Jewish family archetypes that were depicted in these early silent films; Patricia Erens defines these as "the Stern Patriarch, the Prodigal Son, the Rose of the Ghetto...[and] the Long Suffering Mother".<sup>2</sup> Secondly, I wish to suggest that Polonsky's screenplay of *Body and Soul*, written specifically for Garfield, fully understood and articulated the progressive aspects of the actor's previously defined screen persona—in particular, its ambivalent relationship to the American male ideals of toughness, violence and independence, its dignified embodiment of the social outsider and the inclination toward rationality, social responsibility and collectivism.<sup>3</sup> (Incidentally, one can argue that Garfield's screen persona evolved and became defined through collaborations with various screen and theatre artists; most notably, Polonsky, Clifford Odets and Robert Rossen.)

## John Garfield as the Reformed Street Kid

In his study of the Hollywood tough guy, Robert Sklar defines the cultural type that he calls "The City Boy" and suggests "the trait of dependence was a central aspect in [its] shaping."<sup>4</sup> Sklar goes on to say that the City Boy's "most important relation to women was not as lover but as son".<sup>5</sup> When we approach Garfield's most mature work, it is evident that unlike the roles of someone such as James Cagney (another subject of Sklar's study) whose attachment to family, in particular the mother, is expressed in a more primal way, Garfield's characters are often attached to family and mother figures through a body of values and the need for a supportive community. In comparison to the characters for which Cagney would become known, the Garfield screen persona is grounded, both morally and socially.

Non-filmic materials—such as fan magazines and film reviews—would reference Garfield's Lower East Side roots and help authenticate his onscreen characters. Biographies and contemporary articles portray a young Julie Garfield as an uncontrollable child with no interest in school, often engaging in street fights and joining gangs. In the promotional material for his first boxing picture, *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), Garfield is recalled as a "one-time champ" and a former "Golden Gloves performer". Some of the contemporary Jewish American periodicals would portray him as a tough Jewish youth: "[Garfield] was the sole non-Aryan of a gang of Italian kids ... [who would get] into fights and ... [be] expelled from schools and Talmud Torahs..."<sup>6</sup>

According to biographies and contemporary clippings, while attending PS. 45 in the Bronx, principal Angelo Patri took Julie Garfinkle, the problem child, under his wing and encouraged the young boy's interest in acting. The following quote comes from an article that Garfield wrote in 1948. Here, he describes joining the debating team as a school kid:

**Debating taught me respect for reasoning rather than brute force, an appreciation of words and how to use them... From debating I sort of gravitated naturally to acting. Here was a field where I could give vent to some of the mixed-up feelings inside me that heretofore would erupt in fisticuffs.<sup>7</sup>**

Here Garfield depicts himself as an actor who could have been a fighter, whose "mixed-up feelings" could have easily turned

Jewish boxing champ Davis is confronted with the death of his neighbourhood pal, shorty.







Angered and humiliated by the questions of the visiting welfare woman, Charley insists to Peg that he will become a professional fighter.



Arriving at his new, fancy uptown apartment, Charley is confronted by his family and friends as well as his boxing manager.



After being declared boxing champ, Charley visits severely wounded opponent, Ben.





into physical aggression. This clash between muscle and sensitivity, as well as aggression and reason, gets played out repeatedly in a lot of Garfield's films.

Garfield came of age artistically within the New York theatre world of the 1930s, inhabited by many left-wing children of immigrant Jews. Part of the 1930s Group Theatre ensemble, Garfield played Ralph Berger in the original production of Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* (1935) and was the actor initially intended for the role of Joe Bonaparte in the theatre company's first mounting of Odets' *Golden Boy* (1937). The aspirations of the New York Jewish Left became part of his screen identity (especially since some of his most successful films were either written and/or directed by those who were schooled—politically if not also artistically—in this milieu: for example, Clifford Odets, Robert Rossen, Abraham Polonsky, Elia Kazan and Albert Maltz).

### John Garfield as an Independent Producer

With *Body and Soul*, John Garfield began his career as a producer: Within the independent studio Enterprise Productions, he had his own unit called Roberts Productions, named after his business manager, Bob Roberts. Enterprise Productions strove to give unprecedented creative freedom to the stars, writers and directors, a lot of whom at the studio were politically on the left. Robert Aldrich recalled the utopian aspects of the production company, "Enterprise embodied a really brilliant idea of a communal way to make films. It was a brand new departure, the first time I can remember that independent filmmakers had the money they needed." (But, he adds, "[the studio] didn't have anybody in charge who knew how to make pictures," which resulted in its relatively short lifespan.)<sup>8</sup>

In comparison to the major studios' tendency to downplay Jewish issues and characterizations, Enterprise did not provide the same resistance. The Jewish artists at the studio were therefore able to instinctively draw on their own Jewish roots as much as they liked. For Polonsky and Garfield, "Jewishness was part of [their] lives." In an interview conducted during the early 1990s, Polonsky recalled that the film's protagonist, Charley Davis, was always envisioned as a Jew, "It was just accepted that he was going to be Jewish... No one ever discussed it, [and] during the course of the picture when I wanted to do a scene that made certain reference to the Jews, there was no argument."<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the social mobility promoted in the studio-produced Jewish family melodramas of the 1920s, perhaps the freedom that Garfield and Polonsky enjoyed in expressing the characters'—and possibly their own—Jewish roots allowed *Body and Soul*'s Jewish community "back home" to not only stand for a consistent body of values, but also, these values are shown to embody an alternative to American social mobility.

Set during the thirties, *Body and Soul* chronicles Jewish boxer Charley Davis' (Garfield) rise within the corrupt world of professional fighting. His success as fighter stems from his aggressive drive to leave behind the poverty of his immigrant roots. In doing so, he ultimately alienates himself from his family and its inherent humane values. Faced with the possibility of throwing an upcoming fight—and thereby lose whatever sense of integrity he has left—in order to resolve outstanding debts he has acquired as a successful boxer, Charley re-discovers his moral bearings.

### John Garfield and Hollywood's Depiction of the Nurturing Jewish Family

A cycle of Hollywood films of the 1920s explicitly explored the identity of the assimilating American Jewish son and his relationship to his immigrant family. Perhaps the best known of these early films is Warner Bros' *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Although these early silent films focus on generational conflict within the Jewish family—with the children wishing to break away from the parochialism and poverty of their old world parents and embrace the promise of upward mobility in the New World—they also emphasize the need to maintain familial and communal ties in the face of such assimilation. And in the end, many of these films suggest that the Jewish son is able achieve success and assimilation in America while maintaining a vital connection to his Jewish family and the immigrant community back home, with the mother providing the key link to these roots. J. Hoberman writes that these early films "sweetened the melting pot with the promise of upward mobility and the comfort of transcendent maternal love".<sup>10</sup>

After the First World War and into the Twenties, many children of Jewish immigrants were leaving their parents behind for acculturation into the American lifestyle. Silent film historian Kevin Brownlow suggests that the release of the Frank Borzage's 1920 film adaptation of Fannie Hurst's short story, "Humoresque"—whose commercial success spawned this cycle of silent Hollywood Jewish family melodramas—could not have been more timely: "The postwar generation was rebelling against its parents, and the story exploited their suppressed sense of guilt while it (briefly) restored their parents' confidence."<sup>11</sup> The film served as wish fulfillment for many Eastern European Jewish families in America. As Joyce Antler describes the mother-son relationship in *The Jazz Singer*, "His mother's understanding allows [him] to become the fully American person he wants to be, to have both Americanness and his Jewishness."<sup>12</sup> Here, through the mother figure, the Jewish son could have it both ways—successful assimilation in a society that expected him to shed visible signs of his otherness, without losing a vital connection to the people and values of home. In the opening few moments of Borzage's *Humoresque*, an intertitle proclaims that Mama Kantor (Vera Gordon) can be heard by her children above the sound of the elevated trains. Within the streets of the new world, amid the frantic pace of the modern city, the mother still remains the center of her children's lives.

In contrast to many of the Jewish sons in these 1920s Jewish family melodramas, Garfield's screen characters are often alienated from a nurturing support net that the Jewish family provides in these earlier films. First appearing during the second half of the Depression, his screen persona dramatizes the emotional and moral isolation felt by such an absence. In most of John Garfield's pre-war and wartime films, when playing the generic working-class ethnic, this vulnerability was worked into the narrative by having the actor play orphans, men who are forced to grow up on their own in the streets. But when playing specifically Jewish sons in the mid-forties, Garfield's dynamic expressions of pent-up anger, vulnerability, cold disillusionment and brimming sexuality reinterpret these earlier Hollywood stories of the Jewish son lost between two worlds and update them for an audience that had been weathered by



the Depression and the spread of fascism. More specifically, when playing the Jewish son, Garfield questions the ability of his character to have it both ways—success in America while maintaining a nurturing connection to the people and values of the immigrant family.

While embodying the insecurity and sense of anonymity of the Depression, Garfield displays brashness, sexuality and independence that puts him into conflict with his Jewish family: The same drive that his character in *Body and Soul* needs to get ahead in America is what alienates him from his family, particularly his mother. Garfield as the Jewish son is caught between his struggle to be a dutiful child and his anger and humiliation caused by the poverty that he and his family are forced to endure.

### Young Charley Davis versus the Depression

Consistent with Garfield's characterizations in his progressive Warner films of the thirties often written by *Body and Soul* director Robert Rossen—such as Joe Bell in *Dust Be My Destiny* (1939) and George Leach in *The Sea Wolf* (1941)—as well as his debut as Mickey Borden in *Four Daughters*, Garfield's Jewish boxer of *Body and Soul*, Charley Davis, insists on maintaining his dignity despite the poverty and humiliation that are thrust upon him. Davis has his own illusions of independence. In one of the film's early scenes, he walks down the street of the neighborhood, stops and faintly rolls his shoulders, a subtle gesture reminiscent of James Cagney's self-aggrandizing characters. At various times later in the film, when feeling conflicted and alienated within the corrupt world of professional boxing, he repeats this gesture—although less enthusiastically—as a way of reassuring his composure.

During the earliest moments of the film, Charley as a young man exudes a boyish energy and confidence as well as naïveté. This is nowhere more apparent than the first scene within the film's flashback. Charley has just won his first amateur bout and is being celebrated with a reception given by the "Iroquois Democratic club of the 14th A.D." As a privilege for the night's triumphant amateur pugilist, he is given the opportunity to dance with Peg Borne (Lilli Palmer), the woman hired to dance with the winning boxer. Charley smiles glowingly, applauds for himself and cheers with the rest of the crowd. By making Charley so naïve (emotionally, sexually), the film is setting the first part of the narrative arc that will chart his growing maturity and wisdom in the face of his alienation and corruption.

Although violence is instinctive to Charley, a product of his growing up on the streets, Polonsky's script is also drawing on Garfield's persona and its ambivalence toward violence: Throughout the course of the film, not only is Charley battling between the forces of poverty and success, as well as success and corruption, but also between violence and reason, the latter embodied by his family. When Charley is invited by the M.C. to dance with Peg, he is surprisingly bashful and self-conscious. The M.C. mocks Charley's hesitancy, "Take her around, Charley. She won't bite ya." In fact, at one point, Charley feels so humiliated by the M.C.'s comments that he moves to take a punch at him, but is stopped by Peg: This slight violent threat reflects Charley's emotional and sexual immaturity. Finally, as Polonsky's script beautifully describes, "a little human pity comes into [Peg's] face" and she begins to help initiate the dance.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Peg's attraction to Charley is not only his sexual attractiveness but also his innocence. Early in the film, in a

wonderfully playful scene at Peg's Greenwich Village apartment, she articulates her attraction to Charley:

**Peg:** Well, Charley, you're sort of innocent... You know, when I went to school, I learned a poem. Went:

**'Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'**

**Charley:** What's 'symmetry'?

**Peg (with a smile):** Well-built.

Peg is attracted to, as articulated through her quoting of Blake's poem, the contradiction between Charley's boyish innocence and his physique, the contradiction embodied by Garfield's screen persona. Earlier in this scene, she sketches Charley as a tiger with apparent fur. Peter Valenti comments on "the wonderfully ambiguous image" of Peg's drawing: "Charley is street-wise, but at the same time innocent. He knows survival skills, but not the most crucial ones for his soul. Charley is a tiger, but a neighborhood tiger."<sup>14</sup> But despite such cheerfulness and naïveté, Davis' anger is always under the surface and capable of bursting forth at any moment. A more mild incarnation of this anger occurs in the scene mentioned above, when the MC mocks Charley's sexual insecurity, instinctively causing him to physically threaten the man. Even during this light moment in the film, there is an instinctive resort to violence in the face of humiliation, whether it is caused by sexual embarrassment or economic deprivation. Later in the film, to show local boxing promoter Quinn (William Conrad) that Charley has the drive to make it as a boxer, Davis' close friend, Shorty (Joseph Pevney), starts an argument with another young man in the neighborhood. As expected, Charley comes to Shorty's defense by physically fighting the other man. Polonsky's script describes Charley at this moment as suddenly fighting "with a wild fury, as if to get rid of all his troubles."<sup>15</sup> As Charley confides to Peg, he wants to become a boxer because fighting is the only thing he knows how to do.

In an early scene set at the candy store owned by his parents, Charley's apparent cheerfulness is suddenly—but briefly—undercut when he expresses his resistance toward the limited future he sees for himself in the ghetto. During this moment, he speaks in a quick staccato tone with bitterness that can also be read on his face:

**You think I want to spend the rest of my life selling kids two-cent soda? Mister Davis, gimme a penny candy! Mister Davis gimme a pack of cigarettes! Mind the baby... Make mine raspberry...**

He then shoves down the fountain lever and soda spurts; the sudden sound of the soda punctuates Charley's rapid delivery. Polonsky's shooting script describes Charley's face at this moment as "hard with humiliation and fury."<sup>16</sup> A few moments later, gangsters bomb the speakeasy next to his family's candy store, killing Charley's father.

Charley's ultimate humiliation occurs when a welfare woman arrives to interview his mother, Anna (Anne Revere), much to her son's surprise. After this scene, Charley runs upstairs onto the roof, followed by his girlfriend, Peg. He says to her, "I don't want any handouts. You think I like the idea of waiting for the world to





Alongside Gregory Peck and Celeste Holm, Garfield portrays Dave Goldman in *Gentleman's Agreement*.

decide what to do with me?" From this moment, Charley fully rejects for himself the ambitions and values (education, night school) of his mother and the fate of his father.

#### **Charley's Jewish Father Figure**

The Jewish father, as depicted in Hollywood's Jewish family melodramas of the 1920s, could not find a place for himself as a figure of authority within the Americanizing Jewish family. In most of these early films, the father exhibits passivity in the face of the (largely economic) realities of American life. The role of the Jewish father in the Old World was traditionally that of

scholar while the mother took care of the practicalities of family life. For example, this is reflected in the opening scene of *Hungry Hearts* (1924) where we first see the Jewish mother back in Russia shoveling coal into the stove. In comparison, the Jewish father, a rather frail figure, is shown teaching torah to a group of young children. Such a succinct visual contrast reflects the traditional Jewish gender roles as well as prophesizes the changing dynamic within the Jewish family upon arrival in the New World. Failing to find a practical outlet for his studies in the New World, the father is shown in these films as weak, impractical, and sometimes, as J. Hoberman observes, a figure



of "pathos".<sup>17</sup> Joyce Antler writes on this changing family dynamic, "With the father's loss of masculine potency and status, the Jewish mother's power within the family increased to fill the void."<sup>18</sup>

In *Body and Soul*, Charley's father, David, is played by Group Theatre veteran Art Smith (perhaps most memorable as the meek agent of Humphrey Bogart's Dix Steele in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place*.) In his one scene in the film, David explains how he ended up with a candy store in the "jungle" of the Lower East Side, "Do you think I picked the East Side like Columbus picked America? It was possible to buy the candy store with a small cash down payment." Although possessing pragmatism, his lack of militancy differs from his son. While insisting to his mother that he wants to be a fighter and make something of himself, Charley states that he does not "want to end up like pa." Charley refuses to accept such passivity for himself.

As opposed to his wife Anna, who willfully has her own expectations of her son and expresses them ("Twenty years ago, I wanted to move to a place so our Charley would grow up a nice boy and learn a profession. But instead, we live in a jungle so he could be a wild animal."), David lacks such vision—or is perhaps just more skeptical—and quietly supports his son's ambitions to be a fighter by giving him a few dollars to buy boxing equipment. But his support of Charley's boxing career seems to go against his better judgment: When Shorty runs into the candy store and tells about Quinn's intentions to promote Charley as a fighter, David's concerned expression matches that of his wife. His accidental murder is the final blow in his slow defeat by the harsh realities in which he and his family live.

Toward the end of *Body and Soul*, as Charley is immersed in the moral dilemma of whether to throw his last fight, he is confronted by Shimon, a Jewish neighborhood grocer on the Lower East Side. He is played by Yiddish Theater actor Shimen Rushkin. The Jewish grocer comments how "over in Europe, the Nazis are killing people like us—just because of their religion. But here Charley Davis is champeen." Among the various meanings of this moment, Shimon is addressing the significance of having a strong Jewish fighter—a Samson—in the face of the millions of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution.

In his very interesting essay, "Monarch of the Millions," Peter Stanfield examines the attraction among left-wing Jewish writers and directors to the boxing film genre. These artists, he argues, played a major role in developing the Hollywood post-war boxing genre that began with the success of Garfield's *Body and Soul*. Stanfield suggests that, among the various reasons for their interest in this film genre, "Jewish boxers offered a more legitimate figure with which to counter the stereotype of the effeminate, scholarly, artistically inclined Jew." The Jewish boxer—and Garfield's embodiment of it—offered an alternative to the physically passive image of the Jew. Stanfield goes on to suggest that by offering a proletariat boxing hero and recreating the ethnic working class environment in which such characters inhabited, these successful, assimilating Jewish writers were redeeming themselves in masculine, ethnic and class terms.<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note that Garfield starred as the son, Ralph Berger, in the Group Theatre's 1936 original production of Odets' *Awake and Sing*. With Garfield serving as a sort of ego ideal for the playwright, Odets insisted on the handsome and youthful actor as the affirmative voice of the play.<sup>20</sup> Ralph Berger defines himself in relation to the figures that surround

him. At the start of the play, Ralph is a romantic who warms up to the socialist ideals of his grandfather, Jacob. But over the course of the play, Ralph becomes deeply aware of his grandfather's limitations. As Jacob advises his grandson:

**Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution. But you should act. Not like me, a man who had golden opportunities but drank instead a glass of tea.**

Ralph's father, Myron, also acknowledges himself as a failure who lacks even Jacob's vision, "The moment I began losing my hair, I just knew I was destined to be a failure in life...and when I grew bald, I was." Ralph responds to his father's failure in life, "Let me die like a dog if I can't get more from life." At the play's conclusion, in the face of his mother's internalization of American bourgeois values, his father's passivity and sense of defeat and his grandfather's suicide, Ralph Berger decides to turn his grandfather's socialist ideals for a better world into action. Odets' play chronicles Ralph's movement away from mere romanticism toward conviction and action: After Jacob's death, Ralph proclaims in the final moments of the play:

**'Awake and sing,' he said. Right here he stood and said it. The night he died, I saw it like a thunderbolt! I saw he was dead and I was born! I swear to God, I'm one week old! I want the whole world to hear it—fresh blood, arms. We got 'em. We're glad we're living.**

Similarly, over the course of *Body and Soul's* narrative, as the youthful fighter discovers in himself the values that his mother honors—the humane values of his secular Jewish upbringing, the values that are in his heart—such Jewish militancy becomes realized through Garfield's characterization. As Polonsky defines *Body and Soul* as the world of "want, poor New York Jews, the Enlightenment, and Utopian Socialism, the life of Reason haunting the glorious future," he goes on to say that "Odets, of course, was an electric part of this literary movement, and his plays were their enchanting vision, but Garfield was the star for the whole world, the romantic Rebel himself."<sup>21</sup>

### **Charley's Jewish Mother**

The Hollywood Jewish family melodramas of the 1920s depicted the mother as the main voice of authority within the Jewish family. *Body and Soul* builds on the American Jewish family dynamics portrayed in those early films. With Charley's father absent, the mother is not only the main figure of authority within the family, but comes to embody the Jewish home and its values for her son. Anna Davis, along with Peg, comes to represent an alternative to the individual social mobility that Charley sees as the only way out of the ghetto. In *Body and Soul*, the Jewish mother encourages in her son an alternative to the competitive and aggressive capitalism of American society. The first montage depicting Charley's success as a fighter is rather striking in its emphasis not so much on Charley's success but on the fighters he knocks to the ground. Shot after shot shows Charley's opponents falling down. The sequence even shows railway tracks—a convention in American films of that era that often signified success—with superimposed images of beaten fighters falling to the ground. At the end of this montage, the camera presents the point-of-view of one of Charley's boxing



opponents, as it falls to the ground after Charley's punch. This sequence emphasizes not only the violence that paved the way for Charley's success but also refers to an earlier comment made by Anna concerning the brutality of the sport: after Charley wins his first amateur bout, his mother inquires, "And the other boy, did you hurt him good, champion?" This montage's emphasis on the fallen fighters reflects the concern that Anna articulates in that earlier scene, and based on moments such as these, one can suggest that, despite their understanding of what motivates Charley, the filmmakers are morally aligned with the Jewish mother.

Polonsky and actor Anne Revere build on the positive aspects of the Jewish mothers in films like Borzage's *Humoresque* and *The Jazz Singer*. In films such as these, the mother provided a more humane alternative to the rigid orthodoxy of the Jewish Old World patriarchal tradition. But generally speaking, what defined these earlier Jewish mothers was their adaptability to the New World and their love and hope for their children. In the hands of its left-wing filmmakers, *Body and Soul* develops the Jewish mother's secular and humane values. At the same time, Anne Revere injects the Jewish mother figure with a quiet stoicism, unyielding in her core values. When Charley insists on being a fighter, she responds emphatically, "So fight for something, not for money." Unlike many of the earlier Jewish family melodramas, there is never the sense of the mother living only vicariously through her son's talent and career. In *Body and Soul*, there is a strength to Anna that is not solely invested in her son. When Charley achieves success as a boxer and suggests that his mother give up the candy store and move uptown to "a decent place", she responds, "I live in a decent place, Charley." This provides a contrast to the silent melodramas where the Jewish mother often moves in with her successful son. Anna has a sense of who she is and what she stands for, which is not necessarily defined by her son's ambition.

### Peg and the Jewish Mother

Peg Borne was initially conceived as a girl from Brooklyn, but when Jewish Austrian actor Lilli Palmer was chosen for the role (with the encouragement of Albert Maltz and Ring Lardner Jr. who wrote her first American film, Fritz Lang's *Cloak and Dagger*)<sup>22</sup>, the background of the character was changed: Now Peg became a "classy old-world dame" who grew up travelling around Europe before coming to America with her family and settling in Highlandtown.<sup>23</sup>

Peg's precise ethnicity is rather ambiguous. But often in these early Hollywood depictions of Jewish immigrant life, the ethnicity of the Jewish son's girlfriend is not a major issue, as these films often encouraged assimilation and intermarriage. As we also see in *Body and Soul*, the real importance in these Jewish family melodramas is the ability of the girlfriend (Jewish or not) to coexist with the Jewish son's family. And the bond between Anna and Peg is rather emphatically based on shared values. Anna is impressed that Peg's father was a druggist ("A professional man," the Jewish mother responds with a smile), that she is studying to become an artist and is encouraging Charley's attending of night school. What finally clinches Anna's approval of Peg is the latter's similar modest background and sense of humility. As Peg speaks of herself and her family:

**We're very poor, Mrs. Davis. We've always been poor.  
My father scraped and scraped, and when prohibition**

**came he sold some of the bonded medicinal whisky, you know, without prescription... Oh they arrested and fined him, and I got fed up anyway, so I came to New York. We're nothing fancy.**

The film depicts the solidarity between Peg and Anna, and, for Charley, they come to equally embody the warmth, as well as the values, of home. In a lovely moment toward the end of the film—the morning Charley has returned home after feeling lonely and alienated at a wild party thrown in his uptown apartment—Anna is teaching Peg how to make potato pancakes (although the food is specified only in the script, not in the film). Charley has finished shaving and Peg walks over and kisses him. He closes his eyes, "more," he playfully demands. Peg then puts a piece of the potato pancake in his mouth. "You approve," she asks. He kisses her and says, "Y'know, that's a taste that never leaves your mouth." This moment's blurring of the nourishing ethnic food based on Anna's recipe and the nourishing kiss from Peg helps reflect the latter's vital embodiment, in Charley's eyes, of the Jewish home.

Perhaps a product of the film's mature dealing with family relations as well as its wish to present the immigrant working class community as a positive alternative to the moral compromises associated with American assimilation and social mobility, the characterization of Peg reflects a rather significant break with the Jewish family melodramas of the past: The film openly associates sexuality with the nice Jewish girlfriend. (This is an especially rare occurrence for American Jewish cinema, especially in light of those films from the 60s and 70s where more healthy sexuality and/or sexual confidence is associated mainly with a non-Jewish girlfriend, emphasizing the possibility of sexual freedom only in the world outside the Jewish home and community.)

The early Hollywood Jewish family melodramas never seriously raised the issue of the sexual desires and desirability of both the Jewish son and his girlfriend. Such an issue would become problematic in terms of the intense Oedipal bond depicted between the mother and son, and would perhaps undermine the clean resolutions of these films. But in *Body and Soul*, Charley and Peg's openly sexual relationship is even briefly referred to in the film's opening sequence. When Charley walks into the back bedroom of his mother's apartment, he sees Peg's stockings and slip lying on the bed. He reaches to pull them toward him but restrains himself. Looking for a place "to lie down," a place of comfort and security, it is clear that he longs for the closeness of Peg's body.

Like Joan Crawford in *Humoresque*, Peg is also provided with a sexualized gaze. Through her citing of the William Blake poem and her sketch of Charley, we are privileged to her subjective view of Charley's physical attractiveness, vulnerability and innocence. (It may be worthwhile to note here that boxing films often have an opportunity to deal—however briefly or covertly—with the issue of female sexuality, as the sport consists of the spectacle of two half-naked men.<sup>24</sup>)

### The Jewish Working Class Family and Other "Nobodies"

As Charley immerses himself in the competitive world of boxing, Peg also comes to embody an alternative to the values which threaten to corrupt Charley. After the first montage sequence signaling Charley's meteoric rise as a boxer, Shorty expresses to Peg his concern for the now-successful fighter:



**You know what Charley is, what they're making him? A money machine, like gold mines, oil wells, ten percent of the U.S. mint. They're cutting him up a million ways. You're the only one left, Peg...the only one. He won't listen to me. If you don't hold onto him, it's goodbye Charley Davis. Marry him, Peg, but do it now...now.**

Shorty hopes that marriage to Peg will ground the uprooted Charley.

The ideology of Charley's Jewish working class roots is expressed by a remark made by Peg. Drunk and slightly tipsy, she whimsically describes herself, Anna and Shorty:

**We're all nobody. Do you know who nobody is? Nobody is anybody who belongs to somebody. So if you belong to nobody, you're somebody.**

Peg's comment here, as written by Polonsky, perhaps recalls John Latouche and Earl Robinson's "Ballad for Americans," the contemporary anthem of the Popular Front—more specifically, its lines such as "I'm the everybody who's nobody, I'm the nobody who's everybody." In the song, the "everybodies" are the "etceteras" and the "and so forths" that do the work". But they are "nobodies" because they are disempowered under capitalism. Similar to the song's evocation of the collective ("the nobody who's everybody"), Polonsky sees the working class outsiders of *Body and Soul* as "somebody" when they belong to other "nobodies". In essence, what Polonsky is articulating here is a community of American outsiders who become "somebody" collectively.

Charley insists on his independence and invincibility in the face of the promising but corrupt boxing world. This conflict is succinctly epitomized with a beautifully written exchange of dialogue between Charley and Shorty. Davis resists interference from Shorty as well as his family as they warn him of the corruptness of his manager Roberts (Lloyd Goff). A concerned Shorty warns Charley of his vulnerability with Roberts assuming ownership of his boxing career:

**Shorty: You can tell us [Shorty and Quinn] what and when, but you can't tell Roberts.**

**Charley: But the champ can!**

**Shorty: Not if he gives away his right arm.**

**Charley (abruptly pulling his arm away): ...It's my arm, isn't it?**

Charley responds to Shorty by claiming his illusory sense of impenetrability and independence from everyone: his friends, family and Roberts.

When Roberts successfully encourages Charley to postpone his engagement to Peg ("Keep your mind on the fight," he advises), Roberts is in effect encouraging Charley's emotional (and perhaps moral) independence. In fact, Roberts—and the competitive and aggressive business world that defines him—destroys human relationships; "Everybody dies," is Roberts' rationalization for his exploitation of people. While Charley can rationalize his relationship with Roberts as purely business, Peg articulates the association with Roberts in more human terms: She refuses to continue her relationship with Charley if he does not quit his lucrative boxing career, "I

can't marry you. That'd just mean marrying [Roberts]."

After Peg leaves Charley, the second montage sequence emphasizes Charley's loneliness and emotional isolation: Among shots that depict his glamorous life and celebrity, we see him walk down empty streets and eventually stand longingly in front of Peg's tenement building. She is part of his former community that is closed off to him so long as he competes in the corrupt boxing world. The next scene shows him visit Ben (Canada Lee), an African-American fighter with a blood clot in his head that Charley unknowingly exacerbated during a boxing match. Davis offers him a job as his trainer: "I need someone I can trust," Charley says to him. He seeks out Ben to fill in for the loss of moral guidance and support that was provided by Peg, his mother and Shorty. He seeks the comfort and council of a fellow outsider.

Ben's death plays a rather significant role in Charley's own political and social awakening. We are told earlier in the film that too much anger or excitement is detrimental to Ben's blood clot. Toward the end of the film, Ben encourages Charley to refuse Roberts' demand to throw his next fight by knocking out the opponent to whom he is supposed to take a dive. Roberts hears this and emerges from inside the cottage, "I told Quinn to dump you months ago. He said Charley wanted you. Well, Charley doesn't want you anymore." Ben angrily insists, "Let Charley tell me..." But Charley says nothing in Ben's defense and, instead, looks at the ground. In his final moments, Ben yells and punches his fists in the air, "against an imaginary foe," as the shooting script describes<sup>25</sup>, in defiance against Roberts:

**You double-crossed me before. Now I'm through, done, washed up. I don't scare easy anymore... You don't tell me how to live... I don't scare anymore, I don't scare anymore... Got to take it...always sold out.**

Ben, in a fury detrimental to his blood clot, dies in these final few moments of revolt.

Charley's ultimate decision to renege on his deal with Roberts and not throw his last fight picks up on the angry rebellion that Ben futilely fought in his final moments. Davis makes this choice at one precise moment in the film: Roberts' deal with Charley consisted of him losing by a "clean decision"; but during the twelfth round, Charley sees that Quinn and Roberts are cueing for his opponent to knock him out. As Charley is being prepped for the next round, he quietly but angrily tells Quinn, "You sold me out, you rat. Sold out...like Ben." This is a crucial moment in terms of Charley's awakening. He is now beginning to fully understand his and Ben's similar roles and potentially similar fates within the corrupt boxing system: Like Roberts betrayed Ben by not telling Charley to go easy on him during their fight in the ring, the boxing manager is now telling Charley's opponent, Marlowe, to violate the agreement for a decision.<sup>26</sup> We then see a tight close-up of Charley as the water from the sponge being wiped against his forehead drips heavily down his face, "I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna kill him," he mutters intently. Polonsky's script describes Charley at time moment as "relaxing": Perhaps this refers to his final resolution to the moral dilemma that is tearing him apart.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Jewish son's communal responsibility**

While celebrating assimilation and social mobility beyond the Lower East Side, the Hollywood Jewish family melodramas of



the twenties often paid tribute to the immigrant community left behind. Borzage's *Humoresque* lovingly recreates the Jewish immigrant crowds of New York. In Frank Capra's *The Younger Generation* (1929), the Jewish father and daughter, feeling the oppressive loneliness and emptiness of high society, happily return to the more vital, though poverty-stricken, Lower East Side. *Body and Soul* goes one step further and articulates the political and social necessity of allegiance to this ethnic working class New York neighborhood.

Toward the end of *Body and Soul*, Ben expresses his love for the hero worship among the people in his disenfranchised home neighborhood. "It always felt so great after a win," he extols, "Walking down Lennox Avenue, kids all crazy for you, and proud...a champion of the world for the whole world to know." This is another moment that emphasizes how Ben serves as Charley's emotional link back to the immigrant neighborhood as well as a reflection of the Jewish boxer's repressed sense of responsibility toward his outsider roots. Ben's casual remark comes at a significant moment in the film. The previous scene, set at his mother's home on the Lower East Side, has Charley confront his own sense of responsibility toward his Jewish community when Shimon the grocer emphasizes how "over in Europe the Nazis are killing people like us—just because of their religion." This scene with Shimon is rather crucial in that it allows one to read Charley's act of rebellion against Roberts as his reclaiming of his Jewish roots. The opening line of the contemporary review of the film in the Yiddish daily, *Der Tog*, describes how "'dos pintele yid' [meaning the Jewish spark or the quintessence of one's Jewish identity] grows in the heart of a corrupted 'champion' when he hears about millions of Hitler's Jewish victims in Europe."<sup>28</sup> This comment suggests that Charley's moral awakening perhaps reflects the Jewish consciousness that many American Jews began to feel after the war in light of the revelations concerning the destruction of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis.<sup>29</sup>

But Charley's decision to win the fight more broadly signifies the reclaiming of his moral roots as well as his sense of communal responsibility and ethnic working class solidarity. In fact, Charley's initial unplanned punch against Marlowe is dramatically punctuated with a shot of Peg, an embodiment of Charley's emotional ties toward home, who now cheers and screams.

During the film's production, there was much argument between director Rossen and screenwriter Polonsky over the final few moments of the film. While Rossen felt that it should conclude with Davis being shot over his flouting of Roberts' power, Polonsky decided to end the film with Charley and Peg walking away defiantly from the boxing manager. Robert Sklar suggests that Rossen's ending would have been "truer to life" with Charley "caught in the nexus of capitalistic forces" and unable "to escape them."<sup>30</sup> But Polonsky's decision to end the film by emphasizing Charley Davis's moral triumph is more in keeping with the progressive potential of both Garfield's star image and the actor's embodiment of the American Jewish son.

**Stuart Hands** is completing his Masters thesis on John Garfield, of which this article is an excerpt. He is currently writing an essay on Israeli filmmakers Dan Wolman and Eitan Green. Stuart is the Assistant Programming Coordinator of the Toronto Jewish Film Festival.

## Notes

- 1 See Robert Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 2 Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 74.
- 3 I am not suggesting that *Body and Soul* director, Robert Rossen, cannot claim any responsibility for the finished film or cannot claim an understanding of Garfield's screen persona, as he did write several of the actor's best and most important early roles at Warner Bros. The significance of Rossen's efforts in defining Garfield's persona and developing this film is a subject still yet to be researched and analyzed. But this paper is based mainly on a close reading of *Body and Soul* as well as Polonsky's shooting script, which contains many of the significant details in the film that I will discuss.
- 4 Sklar, 17.
- 5 Sklar, 15.
- 6 Quoted in Samuel Rosenthal, 1993, *Golden Boychik: Star-Audience Relations between John Garfield and the Contemporary American Jewish Community*, (unpublished master's thesis, The Annexberg School for Communication University of Pennsylvania, 1993) 37-8.
- 7 John Garfield and Canada Lee, "Our Part in 'Body and Soul'," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, January 1948, 20.
- 8 Allen Eyles, "Films of Enterprise: A Studio History," *Focus on Film*, April 1980, 25.
- 9 Rosenthal, 104.
- 10 J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between two Worlds*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art: Schocken Books, 1991), 116.
- 11 Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 391.
- 12 Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 24.
- 13 Abraham Polonsky, "Body and Soul" in *Abraham Polonsky's: Body and Soul: The Critical Edition*, ed. John Schultheiss, 11-155 (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies California State University, 2002), 30.
- 14 Valenti, Peter. "Body and Soul in the Forest of the Night: Warner Bros. Meets HUAC" in *Abraham Polonsky's: Body and Soul: The Critical Edition*, ed. John Schultheiss, 299-324 (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies California State University, 2002), 324.
- 15 Polonsky, "Body and Soul," 58.
- 16 Polonsky, "Body and Soul," 51.
- 17 Hoberman, 116.
- 18 Antler, 26.
- 19 Peter Stanfield, "Monarch of the Millions" in "Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklisted Era, eds. Frank Krutnik et al., 79-96 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 87-88.
- 20 Swindell, Larry, *Body and Soul: the Story of John Garfield* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975), 67-68, 80-81.
- 21 Abraham Polonsky, "Introduction" in *Abraham Polonsky's: Body and Soul: The Critical Edition*, ed. John Schultheiss, 7-10 (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies California State University, 2002), 7.
- 22 Swindell, 209.
- 23 Lilli Palmer, *Change Lobsters and Dance* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1975), 175.
- 24 See Stanfield, 82.
- 25 Polonsky, "Body and Soul," 142.
- 26 Paul Buhle and David Wagner write that Charley's "decision not to throw the fight is rooted in his dawning comprehension that he is fighting not only for himself but for Ben and for his neighborhood and for everyone else the system has ground down." Paul Buhle and David Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Polonsky and the Hollywood Left* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 115.
- 27 Polonsky, "Body and Soul," 148.
- 28 N. Sverdlin, "The Career of a Jewish Prize-Fighter Pictured in the Movie 'Body and Soul,'" *Der Tog*, November 11, 1947.
- 29 Rosenthal, 25-28.
- 30 Sklar, 186.



# THE BIGGEST FILM BIOGRAPHER IN THE WORLD

THE FILMS OF KEN RUSSELL FOR THE BBC

BY GEORGE PORCARI



Ken Russell

***I am amazed with matter.***

—William Shakespeare *Cymbeline* (IV.iii,28)

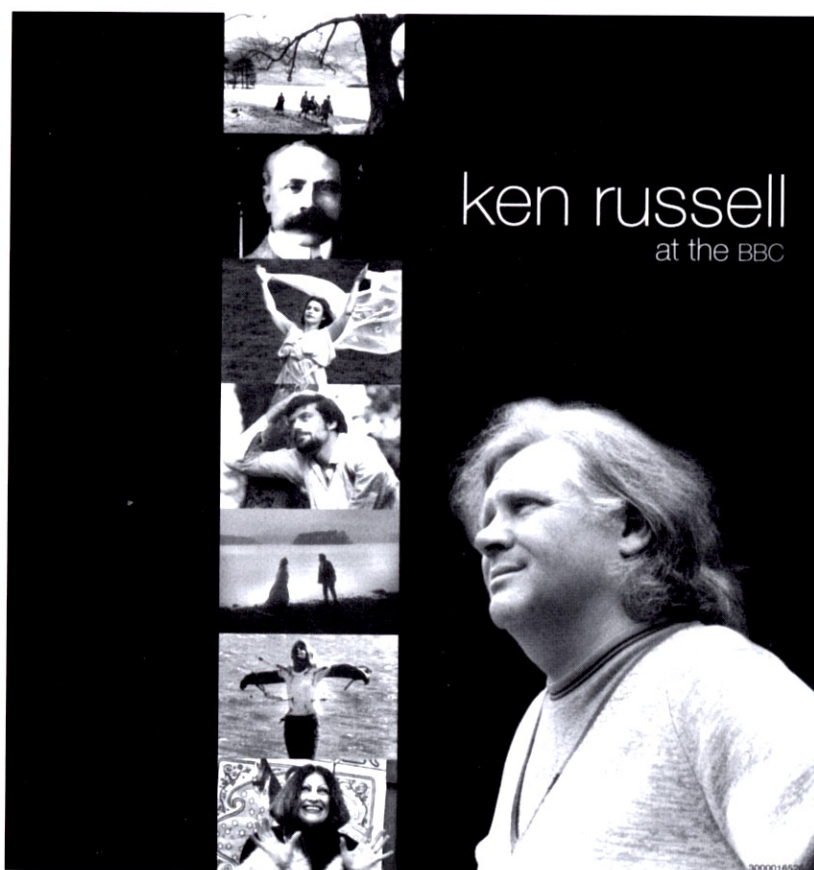
The new DVD release in late 2008 of five of the ten film biographies that Ken Russell made for the BBC is a cause for celebration as that series constitutes one of the major bodies of cinematic work in the 20th Century. The series began in 1959 with a documentary of the little known British composer Gordon Jacob and ended in 1970 with a film on Richard Strauss. The films currently available in pristine prints from BBC Warner were made between 1962 and 1968 first for *Monitor* and then for *Omnibus*, two series that broadcast documentary films of a didactic, instructional and patriotic nature. The one-hour programs shot on 35mm black and white film that Russell made were to be conventionally instructional documentaries but dynamic—that is



"modern" biographies of major European artists and composers, concentrating on British lives but not limited to them. There was to be a voice-over narration that was explicitly an authorial voice, as was typical of documentaries then and now, and there was to be use of extensive archival material made available through the BBC. The idea was to draw a larger and younger audience to the already established tradition of documentary/biographical/educational films by making them more challenging and exciting.

*Elgar* (1962) is a biography of the early 20th Century British composer best known now for his melancholic cello concerto and *The Enigma Variations*. According to the composer, the latter was meant to be a kind of aural portrait of his friends and family. *The Enigma Variations* would, in more ways than one, be a kind of guiding light for Russell's work from that moment on through the whole series of works for the BBC as it remains a masterwork of aural ambiguity and uncertain narrative clues. As the title implies the identities—such as they are—remain unresolved and open-

The films have a voice-over narration but treat their biographical lives obliquely rather than directly. We see inference rather than anecdote. *Song of Summer* (1968) concerns the relationship of the British composer Frederick Delius to the master's apprentice, the young Eric Fenby, who provides the voice-over narration. The paintings and drawings of Edward Munch populate the film and act as a sounding board to that relationship in a way that is never made explicit. Munch's winter aesthetic seems to permeate the summer landscape of Fenby's memoirs in a way that he himself would not have been conscious of until much later. In *Isadora, the Biggest Dancer in the World* (1966), the American dancer Isadora Duncan passes through various landscapes and urban views that correspond to the voice-over narration, but the staged scenes are shot in a documentary style and the documentary shots have highly theatrical music cues to highlight their presence. The various stylistic devices are self-consciously deployed and often one device is made to play off another as in musical



ended. They are a kind of line on which to hang various ideas about people and their musical spirit without ever resolving the issue of explicit meaning or correspondence between sounds and identities. Russell's previous work consisted of various cultural films made for the *Monitor* television series ranging in subject from documentaries of Scottish painters to the life of Kurt Weil. His more personal short films such as *Amelia and the Angel* (1957) showed a brilliant and precocious talent idiosyncratically able to channel the "past" in prosaic images such as landscapes, abbeys, parks, alleys, and hum-drum middle class interiors rendering them alive with possibility. What are those biographical films about and what are they doing aside from fulfilling their didactic purpose, and why are we still watching them half a century later?

counterpoint. For example, the romantic romp on the beach in *The Debussy Film* (1965) mimics a similar one in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) but the counter shot—of the director looking cynically on the scene with bemusement—throws into doubt the authorial intention of the romantic shot. In short the films rely on paradox and ambiguity to construct narratives that are as multi-layered and complex as their subjects.

The most spectacular of the films, *The Debussy Film*, begins with a film crew arriving on location with a hearse and a fire engine to produce the appropriately dramatic fake rain for a funeral procession. This film within a film is to be a biography of Debussy. Who's funeral is it? The film moves from the fake funeral in the rain to the director feeding a line to a child playing



Debussy's son: "It seems he was a composer". Even the director seems unsure. Debussy is played with intelligence and bravado by Oliver Reed an actor who would go on to various collaborations with Russell, and he asks astute questions of his director about Debussy often defending him against accusations of unfeeling carelessness with regard to his female companions. Just who is right in this argument remains an open question. The camera pans from the director and actor in full discussion to an outdoor luncheon in the grass in which the women in Debussy's life set out to picnic in the summer of 1897. The transition in which past and present are made to co-exist in the same space works brilliantly to establish the emotional connections between actors and the people they are portraying and the scene collapses the two time periods as we see the short space (literally and figuratively) between 1897 and 1965. Russell does not draw attention to his poetics, as does Ingmar Bergman who, in *Wild Strawberries* (1957), has a camera pan perform a similar function. On the contrary, the movement is quick and moves on rapidly to other business—nevertheless the poetics are no less effective.

This is made very clear in a brilliant scene that takes place at a contemporary party. Reed/Debussy and the director step into an apartment with the latest hit music on the turntable: *You Really Got Me* by the Kinks. The actors dance the twist and Reed, in a contrary mood, takes the Kinks record out and puts on one of Debussy's most quiet and meditative works. The actress Annette Robertson playing Debussy's mistress challenges Reed's move by beginning to use the music to do an impromptu strip-tease. She directly challenges not only the actor—and by inference Debussy—but the very idea of serious music and what it might be used for. The juxtaposition of the Kinks with Debussy inevitably leads to the question of just what constitutes contemporary music. Are the Kinks Debussy's heirs? Russell posits the question but does not answer it. The relationship of the actors beautifully mimics the relationship of Debussy to Gaby Dupont, the woman that Annette Robertson is playing. The two identities fuse at that moment in way that is both emotionally and aesthetically coherent. Only Godard in *Le Mepris* (1963) is able to match Russell by using Fritz Lang and Brigitte Bardot as twin poles in a film within a film that is being pulled in various directions by warring factions that can never resolve the contradictions of film as art and film as business. *Le Mepris* itself, of course, is the answer to that particular contradiction.

*The Debussy Film's* approach is Brechtian in more ways than one. It brings to the forefront the actors as "actors" and it interrupts the narrative with unforeseen elements of burlesque such as having Reed/Debussy in a match with an "actor" (described in the credits as "the actor"! ) in which they shoot each other with a modern plastic toy that fires rubber darts. Their absurd play—in a 19th century house that Debussy lived in after his success—is telling about the childishness of actors on a set, generally, but more importantly we begin to understand Debussy's subsequent failure to produce work after that initial success. His inability to reconcile that childish selfishness which drove him on in his hungry years with his adult emotional life leaves him in limbo. He spends his time playing games like a boy but can never finish *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the Poe story to which he devoted the last twelve years of his life. The opera, after the fall of Europe and World War I, surely seemed like small potatoes. There was no energy present. His radical vocabulary of sounds had already been co-opted and enlarged upon by Stravinsky, Bartok and others who revolutionized serious music. Debussy is caught between

a century that he helped bring to an end and a new one that he seemed not fully able to comprehend. His retreat into boyhood games shows us, in stark terms that are both comical and tragic, the end of the line. The funeral at the beginning was of course Debussy's own.

*Always on Sunday*—a biography of the painter Henri Rousseau—is perhaps the most moving of the BBC films. The title refers both to the popular film *Never on Sunday* (Jules Dassin, 1960) and to Rousseau's status as a Sunday painter before retiring from his full time job as a clerk in the tax collector's office at age 49 to pursue his beloved hobby full time. His desire to reach everyday people emotionally with his work is analogous to Russell's film and to the series of films as a whole. The uncomprehending audience of pompous twits during an opening of Rousseau's work is shown—in a burlesque manner—by depicting them as they would have been seen by Alfred Jarry, Rousseau's one friend who understood his genius and was able to write intelligently about it. The voice-over commentary hilariously describes Jarry as a pataphysical midget! A description that would no doubt have caused the sensitive Jarry to fire the loaded pistol he carried with him on his bicycling tours of Paris. Their moving friendship is visually developed in a few quick scenes that touch upon Jarry's brilliant play *Ubu Roi*. Russell juxtaposes the bloated bosses on stage with those in the audience to full effect. When the ladies in the front row faint upon hearing the first word in the play: "shit", Rousseau and Jarry can only take delight in their small victory. We sense the precariousness of their lives again by inference. For example the care with which Rousseau handles a pot of stew that is to last him for a week and that he ends up spilling on the shoes of some visiting dignitaries from the art world who look with incomprehension at Rousseau's work—and at his life. Similarly in *Isadora the Biggest Dancer in the World*, Isadora Duncan is shown dealing with in-comprehending administrators in America, Europe and the Soviet Union, all equally oblivious to the creative impulse in her and in themselves, regardless of their political leanings. They manage to wear out her body but not her spirit. Russell's politics are fundamentally humanist but without the cloying aggrandizement of "Humanity" that debilitates so much humanist rhetoric. Russell prizes small moments as well as dramatically sumptuous ones. He loves creative people because of their unwavering emotional commitment to their work. When artists speak of truth and power he is with them every step of the way, and when they make a mess of their lives, he fleshes out their emotional realities and puts them in a historical context without being superior. His are the least didactic biographical films ever made, which is ironic considering their origins on the BBC.

When Hollywood films tackle biographies, then and now, they are first and foremost concepts illustrated with images. A good example is *Immortal Beloved* (1995), a biography of Beethoven made by Bernard Rose in which Beethoven's work is made out to be about his frustrated love for a woman he can never hope to have, and every scene in the film tediously reiterates the same absurd proposition. No attempt is made to try to understand who this very complex man was or why he wrote the music he did to say nothing of his relationship with other composers and musicians or the cultural realities present in Germany at the time. Biography is reduced to melodrama and the music is made to seem anecdotal and trite.

In Russell's work there are multiple narrative threads, each with its own specific character. These narratives, whether theatrical or



realistic, are there to serve the purpose of understanding the full emotional and intellectual components that make up a life to the extent that they can be understood. These multiple realities co-exist not as random bits of scattered ideas but are orchestrated into a coherent artistic vision that not only narrates a life but expresses a point of view about biographies generally that had until that point not been articulated in the cinema. When Virginia Woolf narrated the life of Mrs. Dalloway or James Joyce wrote about the maturing of Stephen Daedalus, they took full advantage of the collage and montage aesthetic derived from film then sweeping the arts. In that sense these early 20th century writers were more cinematic than filmmakers of the time that in their work tended to mimic either the adventure serials of comic strips or the linear narratives of 19th century novels. Most feature films today use the same narrative strategies (as we have seen with the film about Beethoven) but with incidental details and special effects that make them "contemporary". The collision of various narrative strands in Woolf and Joyce—their uses of multiple voices in narrating their works—is musically engaged in a kind of counterpoint that makes relative the authorial narrative voice itself. Such a strategy was not new—it had been seen before with Cervantes, Laurence Sterne and others. What was new was that these multiple narratives are made to articulate a particularly urban sensibility that is both comic and tragic simultaneously while remaining fully engaged with the oncoming rush of disparate impressions common to an urban sensibility. These are principally city lives even if, like Delius or Elgar, they retire to the country from sheer exhaustion.

What Russell did with narrative is to fuse the theatrical, the burlesque, the drama and the documentary into a dense and intensely felt cinematic tour-de-force. This intensity of feeling often mimics that of the biographical subject who is often a young romantic. For example, the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Rossetti in *Dante's Inferno* (1967) is seen in the full fever of creative engagement. The camera movement and the heroic music share in Rossetti's enthusiasm, youth and promise. In that sense Russell is able to have his cake and eat it—that is he is able to share in the romantic excess of his characters by mimicking their explosive creative temperaments, but unlike them is able to pull back and see that romanticism in the context of other counter narratives that put that romanticism in perspective. A case in point is to be found in *Dante's Inferno* as we see Dante Rossetti's first view of Jane Morris, his mistress to be, and the subject of many of the Pre-Raphaelite's best work. Her idealized image would preoccupy much of Rossetti's work for the rest of his life. This momentous encounter is depicted with energetic cuts and musical starts and stops fully engaged with the romanticism of the moment as in the beginning of *Jules and Jim* (Truffaut 1962). This is followed by a slow static scene in which the artist and his friends carefully make a painting using Jane Morris who is frozen in a conventionally heroic neo-classical pose; at which point she suddenly starts to chew gum and lets go of a Yo-Yo with her "heroically" poised hand completely ridiculing the gesture and the sentiment. (Interestingly in Russell's work it is always women who throw a monkey wrench into the pretentious endeavors of egotistical men.) Such a scene spectacularly throws into doubt the Pre-Raphaelite ideology of pre-Renaissance classical order and ideal beauty that they so earnestly believed in and sought to create in their work. It suggests strongly that such endeavors are fantasies that have little or nothing to do with the everyday world as it is. Again, Russell gives voice to two contra-

dictory sentiments or voices within the same work to ecstatic effect for we can never be sure where the film will go next.

The shifts between these various voices can only be described as musical or polyphonic that calls to mind the various "voices" in modernist poetry such as *The Wasteland* by Eliot and the voices of modernist music—most obviously in the work of Stravinsky who mimicked various past works into a collage (his detractors would say a pastiche) of disparate and fragmented sound bites. Such an aesthetic was meant to express the varieties of urban experiences and scientific ideas regarding randomness and relativity that were then new. In Russell's work the highly theatrical tableaux that express concepts visually and the highly realistic scenes that express the singular evanescence of particular moments work not in opposition but, on the contrary, to show that there is no real opposition between the two: the tableaux suppose the realism and vice versa and the dialectic between them is expressed dramatically and visually with immense emotional impact.

Ken Russell would move into feature films in 1967 with the slight *Billion Dollar Brain* and then, two years later, direct the more substantial *Women in Love* (1969). The television work did not entirely end there as he returned for the same *Omnibus* series to make a biography of the German composer Richard Strauss. The resulting work, *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970) is one of the most controversial films of his career. The film openly ridiculed Strauss' Nazi leanings in a burlesque manner typical of Russell's work, yet the homoerotic elements and the satire of Nazi ideology were too much for the established institutions of the time. Music from the Strauss family was always popular amongst Parliamentarians! A motion was passed on the floor of Parliament to condemn the film; the BBC, after first supporting it, finally pulled the film. Russell's work for the BBC was done—at least for eight years. He returned in 1978 to make *Clouds of Glory: William and Dorothy*, a biography of the relationship between the English poet William Wordsworth and his sister. He has continued to produce film biographies for the BBC including an exceptional film on the life of Anton Bruckner in 1990.

His subsequent work in films and television would be often uninspired and mannered but sometimes brilliant. He would occasionally use the same extremely talented people that he had with him for the television work, such as Melvyn Bragg, who wrote many of the BBC films and would write the biography of Tchaikovsky, *The Music Lovers* (1970), and his wife Shirley Russell, who was costume designer for *Dante's Inferno* and *Song of Summer* and would go on to work on the biography of the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Savage Messiah* (1972), among others. Russell's later work would often degenerate into bombastic caricature as in *Litomania* or *Salome's Last Dance* but the work done for the BBC in the sixties is another matter. The films were challenging and brilliantly inventive, completely transforming the way we think of documentaries. Russell's work looks more modern, more engaging, more alive, and more intelligent than anything not only in contemporary broadcasting media but in contemporary cinema. Those films are teeming with a sense of immediacy and vitality and, in spite of the didacticism inherent in the initial project as it was conceived by the BBC, there is much that we can still learn from them.

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# 2009 CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

BY ROBERT K. LIGHTNING

On this my first visit to the Cannes Film Festival, my viewing selections were, by and large, fortuitous. (Beyond an attempt to see as many Canadian films as possible, the selection process was entirely without system). The conventions of traditional narrative cinema were predominant among the films that I saw with predictable exceptions like Tsai Ming-Liang's *Visage* (where the conventions of post-war European art cinema predominated). Home, family and gender relations were also predictably the focus of most of the films I saw.

Of those films, in terms of narrative content, Quentin Tarentino's *Inglourious Basterds* was the most audacious (I did not see *Antichrist*), utilizing as it does the history of World War II as well as the conventions of the anti-Nazi film as the basis for a violent revenge fantasy. (Due to the nature of the material and its contemporary political relevance, I am reviewing *Inglourious Basterds* separately. The Tsai will be reviewed at a later date). Most of my selections proved of modest achievement with the Tarentino and Tsai providing variety of content and style respectively. (I apologize in advance to both the reader and filmmakers for any errors in the following readings including those of judgement, based as they are upon one viewing of each film in the heightened atmosphere of a film festival. This preamble should also stand as a general spoiler alert).

## **Min Ye/Tell Me Who You Are...**

(Souleymane Cissé, Mali/France)

Set among Mali's bourgeoisie, *Min Ye* details the disintegration of the marriage of two professionals: she, a sales representative for a vitamin company; he, a venerated filmmaker (suggesting the possibility that the material is autobiographical). Reminiscent of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, if for no other reason Cissé's film is fascinating (at least to this western viewer) for the dichotomy of local and generic detail, that is the contrast the film inadvertently reveals between those aspects of marriage specific to local custom (primarily polygamy) and those intrinsic to bourgeois marriage per se. For instance, exemplifying the local, the wife's presence is not only expected but much desired by the polygamous husband's teen-aged daughter (by another wife) at the daughter's birthday party. It would be difficult to find an equivalent to this extended family tie (where the daughter even refers to the more recent wife as 'aunt') in the west. On the other hand, the rivalry between the two wives (the party is disrupted by name-calling and the exchange of threats between the two women) easily equates with negative relations between current spouse and ex-spouse in western culture.

The film is also about the continuing emotional purchase of cultural traditions in the face of modernity, a theme made

apparent by the supreme irony that a woman in late middle-age and of completely independent means should nonetheless feel compelled to commit to heterosexual marriage. The wife, Mimi, has in fact only agreed to a late *polygamous* marriage because she presumed that it would allow her a certain amount of freedom within marriage and, as the film introduces her flagrantly engaged in intimate relations with her long-time lover, the particular type of freedom she mistakenly thought marriage to a polygamous professional would allow is made obvious. Mimi, in fact, uniquely among her set of female professionals, actively challenges patriarchy's sexual double standard. If her affair is largely accepted with a wink and a nod by other women her request for a divorce is roundly condemned by all, including her own female lawyer (If the film accurately depicts contemporary Mali, women are very well represented in the legal professions).

As a woman brazenly, even recklessly, challenging a profoundly traditional patriarchal society (in which a lover can still be charged as 'co-respondent' in a divorce case), Mimi is almost totally engaging. A wife's virtue, even when wed to a polygamous husband (who condemns Mimi for violating "our laws"), becomes the crucial issue upon which Mimi is judged by her society and she adamantly refuses to admit her transgressions, even to a witch doctor (who provides her a potion to speed the divorce, to be given her husband after sex). The problem for the non-West African viewer will be in fixing upon the appropriate attitude to take toward some of Mimi's methods. (This ambiguity could also derive from filmmaker bias). She habitually lies about her behavior, uses sex strategically to gain an advantage over her susceptible husband, unfairly fires a female servant she wrongly accuses of disclosing the affair, and even tries to shoot her husband in the back. A willful, spoiled example of eternally changeable Woman or a woman absolutely (if less than heroically) refusing to humble herself before patriarchy?

## **Einaym Pkuhot/Eyes Wide Open**

(Haim Tabakman, Israel/France)

Although it does not contribute anything radically new to the Gay Tragic Romance, the genre of which *Brokeback Mountain* has proven thus far the most complete expression, *Einaym Pkuhot* is nonetheless a moving story of impossible gay love in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community. The elements essential to the genre are all there: the defiantly committed homosexual, here Ezri (Ran Danker), a homeless student who has ventured to the community in search of an ex-lover (who now rejects him) and instead finds shelter and a job in a butcher shop; the reluctant lover, Aaron the butcher (Zohar Strauss), a married orthodox Jew, deeply committed to his faith, his family and his



community; the rigid and oppressive community within which the affair takes place; and, of course, the tragic demise of one of the lovers.

One symbol, hitherto unique within the cycle to *Brokeback*, resonates within *Einyam Pkuhot*: the slaughter of animals. In *Brokeback* the slaughter of an animal signals a significant development in the relationship of Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar: Ennis demonstrates his growing affection for Jack by shooting an elk to provide him meat. One thinks immediately of psychoanalytic theory, specifically the two violations of a totem absolutely forbidden primitive man as classically related by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*: the killing and eating of the ancestral animal. Thus the violation of patriarchal law that homosexual love enacts is given an immediate and appropriate symbolic rendering through the killing of the elk.

If, in *Brokeback*, animal slaughter (and the enthusiastic meal that ensues) alludes to the two immediate results of the primal crime—the celebration of the elimination of the father and the subsequent kinship this act produces in the ‘horde’—in *Einyam Pkuhot* the symbolic killing of ‘the father’ is enacted by the butcher *daily* through the ritualistic preparation of meat, realizing not only the transition of the primal crime into its symbolic form in the totem meal but totemism into organized religion. Thus the contrast between transgression and custom in the two films’ representations of animal slaughter realizes the cultural and historical developments theorized by Freud. Kinship and community cohesion, however, remain the chief symbolic effects of animal slaughter in *Einyam Pkuhot*, with Aaron as the community’s symbolic sacrificial priest.

As butcher/priest, Aaron is fully incorporated into the organic religious community and, under Aaron’s tutelage Ezri is briefly integrated into that world too. Ezri has ostensibly come to the community seeking a school and an early scene in the synagogue conveys a warm sense of communion and conviviality among Talmud scholars (including Aaron and Ezri) through discussion, shared song, drink and even physical contact: The culminating act of the evening’s studies is a rapturous group embrace. Here too are implied the limitations of community: Studies are restricted to men; same-sex physical contact is restricted to the platonic.

Women and homosexuals are not only forbidden certain privileges of ‘community’ but are subjected to the community’s oppressive vigilance. The homosexual affair (which transpires in Ezri’s makeshift bedroom in the butcher shop) is juxtaposed throughout with that of a young heterosexual woman openly involved with one man although betrothed by family arrangement to another. (Underlining the connection between the oppression of women and gays, her shop is directly across from Aaron’s). Both transgressing couples become the focus of the community’s antipathy and eventually its violence (repression’s failure clearly leading to direct suppression) when they are threatened by a local vigilante group, the Modesty Guards. Clearly a mirror inversion of the Talmud scholars, the Modesty Guards deploys force rather than reason as a tool for social control and is comprised entirely of *young* men. This last point is telling: As young men, the Guards’ members have not yet learned to master forbidden desires (through repression, clandestine expression or sublimation—compare the homoeroticism of the Talmud scholars) and thus desire’s defiant expression is far more psychologically unsettling to them, with aggression the logical result.

Exploring the “binding force” of the shared meal for the ancient clan in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud refers to the Hebrew phrase (echoed in Jesus’ words to the apostles during their final meal) that states the claims of kinship, “I am your bone and your flesh”. Director Haim Tabakman seems perfectly aware of the metaphoric connection between butchery and community cohesion, shared meals being a recurring feature of his film. It is perhaps worth noting when referring to the community’s beneficence to its members (in an interview in the film’s production notes), Tabakman states “They take care of you...you are never alone or without food.”

Aaron’s tragedy is that (unlike Mimi in *Min Ye*) he has internalized the tenets of the society that privilege him as a community elder (ironically he pressures the heterosexual lovers to end *their* affair) and ostracize him as a homosexual (subsequent to the affair, his shop is condemned as “unclean” and boycotted by the community). In addition to kinship, *guilt* is a legacy of the primal crime (and the primary basis of organized religion) and both weigh heavily upon him. Taking the forms of, respectively, community pressure and Aaron’s own self condemnation, it is this twin legacy that marks Aaron’s transition from symbolic priest to, finally, the community’s sacrificial lamb.

## CANADIAN FILMS

The following readings are of three Canadian productions. (Because of an error in the program guide, a fourth film, *The Master Key* from Québec, was only viewed in part and is thus not given a reading here). Although hardly ‘Canadian’ in the same sense as the other films, Terry Gilliam’s London-set *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (a Canadian and British co-production) is included here. Providing me an opportunity for a comparative examination with Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*, I will review another Canadian film, *Polytechnique*, separately.

### J’ai Tué Ma Mère/I Killed My Mother (Xavier Dolan, Québec)

After one viewing I will risk saying that (after *Inglourious Basterds*) *J’ai Tué Ma Mère* was the best film I saw at Cannes. The film opens with the sensuous close-up of a woman’s mouth as she eats (cream cheese), an image redolent of a television commercial for candy or breath mints. The director cuts to a two shot of the woman, Chantale (Anne Dorval), and her teen-aged son, Hubert (director Dolan) as she continues munching, the son expressing a disgust (both physically and verbally, in voice-over) so extreme as to be comical. A mixture of humor and invective runs throughout *Ma Mère*, a comedy with very serious undertones.

One thinks immediately of the Oedipus complex and the son’s turning from the mother, the first object of desire, as the source of the son’s ambivalence toward Chantale and this does prove a factor. Hubert’s revulsion is matched by evidence of lingering affection for his mother as when he tells Chantale, “I love you. I’m telling you so you won’t forget.” His awareness of his own ambivalence is revealed in a series of ‘confessions’, black-and-white, direct-to-camera monologues that appear at first stylized representations of *interior* monologues. The break with the film’s predominant signifiers of realism (e.g. color photography) in these moments of self-reflection is only apparent, the confessions in fact comprising Hubert’s black-and-white video *diary*. The intelligence of the film’s twenty-year old director is exemplified by this strategy: By postponing the revelation





of the material nature of the confessions, the viewer is positioned to empathize with the mother in her shock when *she* uncovers the video material and its content later in the film. This strategy will be deployed elsewhere and will aid in maintaining viewer empathy for Chantale as her reactions to her son's loathing become more extreme and potentially alienating.

An Oedipal reading is further suggested by another strained family relationship in the film, Hubert's sympathetic teacher to her father. But the degree of Hubert's antagonism, its focus on areas such as the mother's comportment, etc. suggest an almost willed resentment on his part. The film's title derives from an incident where, required to write about his mother for a school assignment, Hubert instead declares his mother is dead. (Leading to the hilarity and pain of the moment when Chantale unexpectedly turns up at school). But Hubert's acute or problematized Oedipal trajectory begs to be discussed in terms that rarely arise in relation to the Oedipus, those of gender politics. In the production notes, the director himself states that his intent was to "...portray a relationship—a two-way relationship, that is".

Hubert's objectification of his mother certainly suggests such a reading and two key scenes reveal Chantale's acute sensitivity to the ever-present possibility of the imposition of male authority or control. In the first Hubert runs away to live with

the long-absent father who abandoned mother and child years before. Clearly a failure as father and husband, he nonetheless attempts to advise Chantale on parenting—an attempt she confidently rebuffs. Similarly (in the film's most vivid scene), when Chantale is chastised for bad parenting by a school principal after Hubert disappears, she releases what is clearly long pent-up rage at presumptive male authority. Clearly Chantale has achieved a hard-won state of independence from male influence *born of necessity* and refuses to indulge even her son's attempt to impose it.

*J'ai Tué Ma Mère's* thematic richness derives from its gendered rendering of the Oedipus, the import of which needs hardly to be stressed in an era where single motherhood is perhaps more common than the nuclear 'norm'. If the film is fair to the Chantales of this world, it is equally so to the Huberts: The very conditions that conduce to the mother's increasing strength of character and emotional independence, conduce to the patriarchal son's feelings of resentment toward her and a corresponding nostalgia for a period in their relationship when he was more central to her world, when it was easy to love 'mommy'. This point is made clear at the conclusion of *Ma Mère* when Hubert and Chantale reunite at the site of Hubert's greatest happiness, his childhood home, tellingly referred to as "the Kingdom".



**Crackie****(Sherry White, Newfoundland and Labrador)**

In the coming-of-age tale *Crackie*, one of the film's themes—validating the unconventional, non-bourgeois family unit—is suggested from the film's opening: Beneath the credits, a typical family squabble transpires between a teen and her guardian—while they scrounge through refuse in a garbage dump. Seventeen year old Mitsy chafes under the no-nonsense rule of her shrewd, tough-talking grandmother, Bride (a Marie Dressler type, played by Mary Walsh in the film's best performance). Attempting the familiar Oedipal transition to psychosexual and social (as well as economic) independence, Mitsy's options in life are limited not only by the cultural isolation of a small Canadian town but also by indigence and social marginalization within that environment. (Living in a ramshackle house, it is suggested that Bride also possibly prostitutes herself). The adoption of a mutt (the 'crackie' of the title) becomes just one point of contention of between the two women.

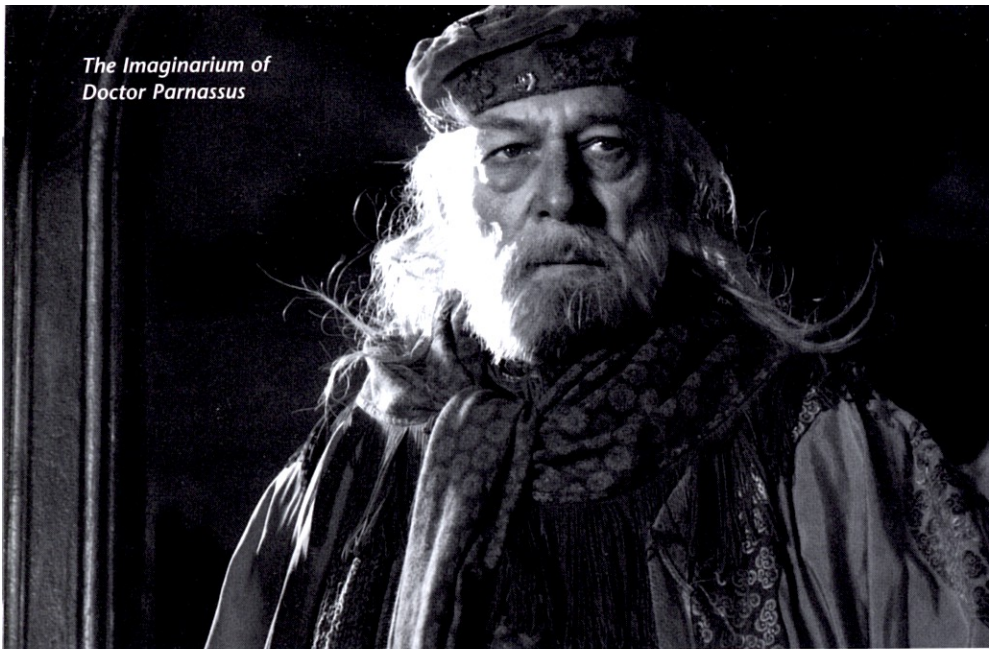
The film provides ample evidence of Mitsy's lingering immaturity, not least through her inept (if loving) care of the dog. Her one reality-based goal is to become a beautician. But when she receives government financial assistance toward that end, her successful completion of courses is threatened by her emotional investment in two adolescent fantasies: reunion with the mother who abandoned her at age four and romantic commitment from a local lothario (a fry cook) with whom she is involved sexually. (The two fantasies will converge disastrously late in the film). Sexual experimentation (Mitsy trades the lothario sex for the crackie) threatens also to continue the family legacy of unwanted pregnancy.

When the mother *does* return she proves, as Bride had warned, anything but maternal. But true to the film's promotion of a non-traditional conception of 'family', guidance and emotional support (as well as the potential means to future financial security) are provided Mitsy by the head of the beautician's college. A moving if sometimes predictable film, *Crackie* fulfills producer Sherry White's *Streely Maids Films* aim (as noted in the production notes) to "focus on small, human stories of bleak worlds". *Crackie* might, at times, suggest an exceptional *After School Special* and if I acknowledge the generic similarities here it is only to say that its modest production values and subject matter are more typical of commercial television. (Television production is included in the respective *résumés* of co-producers White and Jennice Ripley). The film's overarching insight is everywhere evident and perhaps best illustrated by Mitsy's recurring memory of a day she spent fishing with her mother, a *madeleine* of perfect mother-daughter union that for Mitsy justifies her massive emotional investment in the hope of reunion, a memory that proves *selective*. It is only when the eventful day is recalled in its entirety that Mitsy is able to move beyond fantasy and accept the true heroine of her life story.

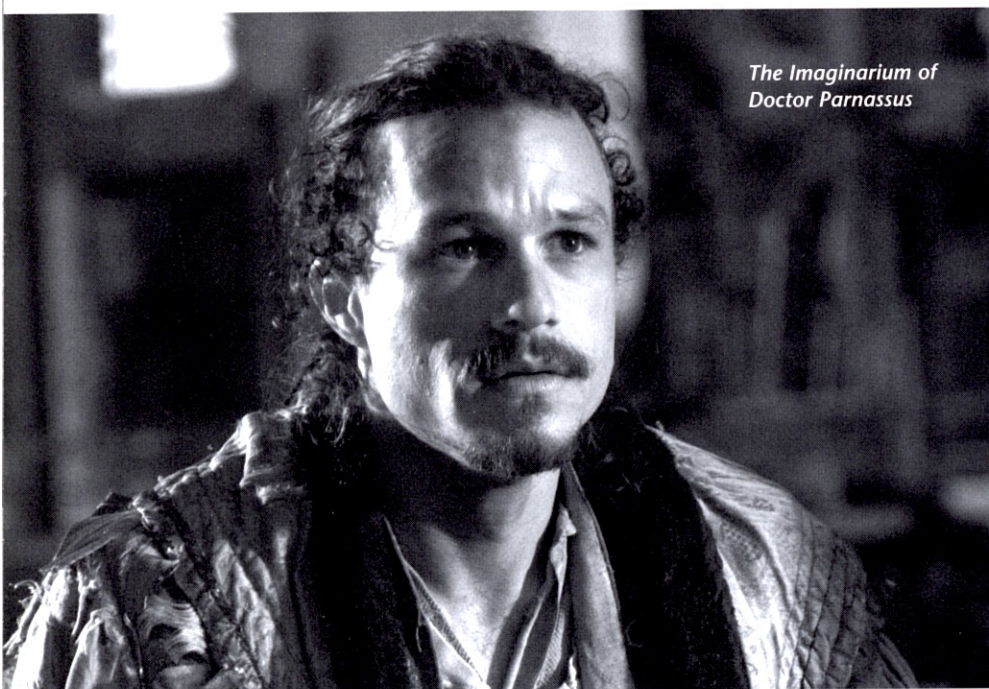




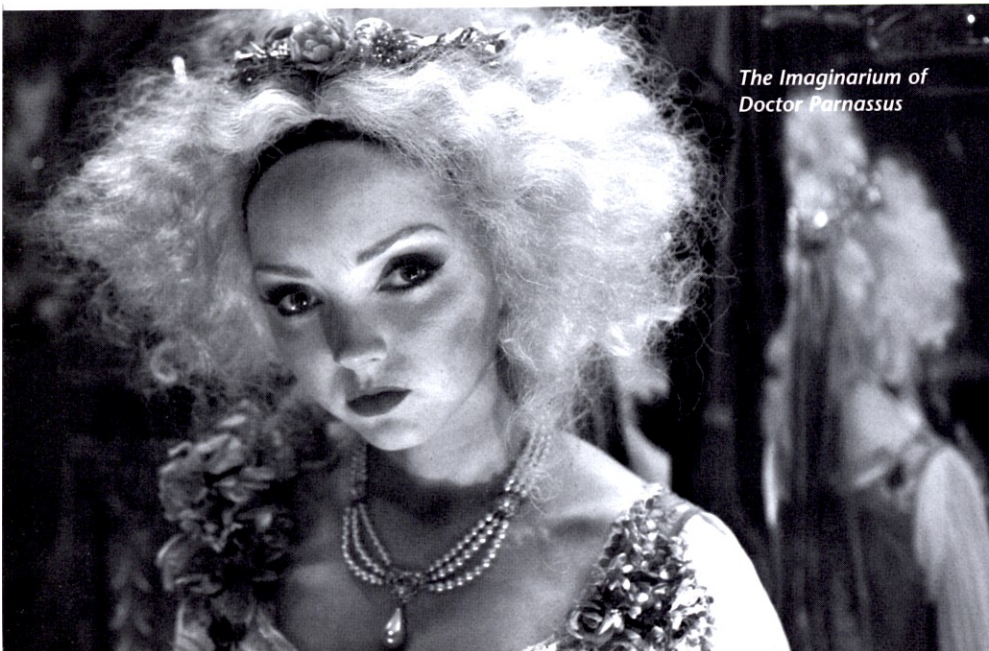
*The Imaginarium of  
Doctor Parnassus*



*The Imaginarium of  
Doctor Parnassus*



*The Imaginarium of  
Doctor Parnassus*



## **The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus**

(Terry Gilliam, British Columbia/  
United Kingdom)

In its baroque mixing of theatrical spectacle and cartoon effects, human exotica and human grotesques, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* is familiar fare from fantasist Terry Gilliam. Also familiar are the plot convolutions and redundancies that suggest (within individual films) stymied creativity. This artistic block may be rooted in Gilliam's problematic politics...or, rather, lack thereof: The promising anti-authoritarianism that runs throughout his work proves again and again primarily *personal* (castration anxiety, a Gilliam thematic trope, is its predictable confederate) and not equated with any discernable progressive political ideology: *Brazil* demonstrates that Gilliam's political vision can encompass a dystopian police state as well as a terrorist counteroffensive but *not* socialism. The conclusion of *Imaginarium* is equally exemplary of Gilliam's essentially bourgeois sensibilities. Having bartered his own daughter to the Devil, Dr. Parnassus/Christopher Plummer (the film's dealer-in-spectacles and leader of an itinerant theatrical troupe) redeems himself (the redemption/justification of the fabulist—presumably a recurring Gilliam alter ego—is a favorite Gilliam theme) by joining forces *with* the Devil (thus making complete nonsense of the Devil's threat throughout) to eliminate the film's true villain. Achieving their goal, Parnassus is rewarded with a final image of his daughter now married and with a child, seated in bourgeois comfort in an upscale London restaurant, she and her husband (a former member of the troupe) both fashionably attired and reformed of their prior outsider status. Capitalist social norms are reinstated quite firmly at the conclusion of *Imaginarium*, with patriarchy (the Devil, Faust and new husband symbolically one) treble so.

Pre-release publicity had centered on the untimely death of star Heath Ledger during production and he remains central to what is of value in the film, not least through his predictably imaginative performance. Credit must also be given Gilliam for cleverly (if not always successfully) masking Ledger's disappearance from the film. I will risk proposing that the changes in the character Tony—specifically, from the hapless amnesiac embod-



ied by Ledger to the charlatan philanthropist embodied largely by Colin Farrell (in an equally fine performance)—were engendered by Ledger's sudden death. (The character is also embodied by Johnny Depp and Jude Law). True or not, this shift in character allows Gilliam a rare opportunity to join his anarchic impulses to *realpolitik* in what appears to be an attack on former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. (Deploying a partial anagram of the prime minister's name, a newspaper headline at one point proclaims "TONY LIAR"). Joining what appears to be a current cycle of films critical of Blair and/or his policies (among them *The Queen* and according to reports, the current *In the Loop*) Gilliam's prolonged depiction of Tony's public downfall seems generated by genuine political repulsion. Gilliam even burlesques the historic Anglo-American political alliance when a grinning, wheelchair-bound, victory-sign waving figure (a seeming composite of FDR, Nixon and George Walker Bush) makes an appearance. If limited in scope, the anti-Blair polemic has (within the Gilliam universe) the benefit of relative lucidity and clarity of intent.

Gilliam concludes with an explicit tribute to Ledger ("A film from Heath Ledger and his friends") but the most moving tribute to Ledger doesn't mention him at all. At one point in the film we are given a vision of three boats on a river, on their respective sails images of Rudolph Valentino, James Dean and Diana Spencer. Johnny Depp describes these figures as "...forever young...gods" further noting that "Nothing is permanent—not even death." The sincerity of this offering to Ledger's fans is all the more apparent for being so idiosyncratic.

### Revising Genre, Revising History: on Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*

By now it should be abundantly clear to everyone that *Inglourious Basterds* is not only a box-office hit but a *cause célèbre* of the first order, generating wildly opposed opinions—opinions that in fact mirror the trajectory of my own since seeing the film in Cannes in the spring. Although initially dismissing the film as an irresponsible Tarantinian gore fest and although I continue to have mixed feelings regarding the film's implications, I have come to regard it as an important film. The core of my initial objections was composed of two parts

That Tarantino (in his bloody zest to refashion the anti-Nazi film to what I supposed was his own value system) was inviting the audience to engage uncritically with an ethos of revenge and one-upmanship, one in which the value of the will-to-power and destruction are ascendant. Within this system of values the victory of the pro-democracy forces is achieved (in Tarantino's fantasy revision of history) through their greater viciousness. This in turn creates, within the film, intermittent (and, I originally presumed, unintentional) sympathy for the Nazis, as the victims of pro-democracy brutality.

That this ahistorical rendering of the fight against fascism (ahistorical, that is, in modifying the threat posed to the world by the fascist state) was not only irresponsible in the era of the War on Terrorism, the Military Commissions Act, "extraordinary rendition", and the gross expansion of the powers of the executive branch of the U.S. government (an era, that is, when policy has again brought the U.S. close to creating its own police state) but *symptomatic* of that era.

The intentionality of the *Basterds* project is more apparent to me now, the film's critical view of those opposing the Nazis and

the blurring of the division between the Nazis and the freedom fighters systematically rendered and composed of certain key elements among which are:

The doubling of Nazis and freedom fighters, most obviously the doubling of Nazi Col. Landa/Christoph Waltz and American Aldo Raine/Brad Pitt as both ruthlessly efficient hunters, respectively of Jews and Germans. The film's first scene, for instance has Landa grill a French farmer for information and very shortly thereafter Raine grills a German officer for information. Later Raine tortures Bridget Hammersmark/Diane Kruger (puncturing her leg wound with his finger) to test her allegiance and shortly after that, discovering she is a traitor, Landa murders her. In terms of her ruthlessness, Shosanna/Mélanie Laurent too is ironically linked to Landa, who in the film's first act of viciousness murders her entire family. But in her ruthless drive to eliminate the Nazi high command (suddenly placed irresistibly in her lap) she mimics Landa, similarly threatening to eliminate the family of a film processor if he refuses to develop her film.

Obviously the Landa/Raine/Shosanna connection is not serendipitous: It is the ruthlessness of the Nazis that brings into existence the even more ruthless response of the American and French freedom fighters. Clearly the film dramatizes the implications of Raine's philosophy of terror: One must become like the Nazis (or worse) to combat them. But just in case we miss the point that we are meant to view our 'heroes' critically, Tarantino represents the violence strategically, presenting only the bloodletting enacted by the *freedom fighters* in gory detail. The film's two initial instances of mass violence (the farmhouse massacre by the Nazis, the massacre of the German unit by the Basterds as recounted by Pvt. Butz) are illustrative. Whereas one might reasonably expect to see something of the results of the farmhouse killings to increase our sympathy for Shosanna, Tarantino shows us nothing. On the other hand while it could certainly be argued (as I initially attempted to do) that in the massacre of the German troop (where scalping and battery are rendered in detail) we are being encouraged to identify both with the Americans' bloodlust and Raine's rationalization of the use of terrorism to combat the Nazis (articulated in his speech to the Basterds in the scene immediately preceding), revulsion and disgust with Raine and his troop as perpetrators of violence are equally probable reactions to what we see onscreen and I can find no evidence in the scene to suggest that the director





opposes this reaction. In fact the vulnerability of the event's sole survivor and narrator, Pvt. Butz/Sönke Möhring, suggests the director is attempting to encourage feelings of common humanity with individual Nazis to make the audience question Raine's single-minded use of terror.

The horror film (a genre which typically turns a distorted or exaggerated lens upon 'normality') is also referenced by Tarantino and is exclusively associated with the efforts of the freedom fighters. This is primarily located in the scene.

Just examined and primarily in the gruesome imagery which immediately signals our immersion in a world of inverted values, a grotesque mirror of our own world, a world of the id. Tarantino makes both an explicit reference to the horror film via the name "Hugo Stiglitz" (star of Mexican exploitation films, including horror) as well as an implicit one via the casting of *Hostel* director Eli Roth as the golem-like "Bear Jew" (who, in a telling bit of self referencing, was born in Massachusetts like his character). Also noteworthy is Shosanna's 'resurrection' after death as one of the damned, a monstrous "Giant Face" banshee, engulfed in hellish flames.

Additional evidence of the blurring of the Nazi/freedom fighters division and Tarantino's critique of the freedom fighter's agenda includes Christoph Waltz's American-sounding accent when he speaks English, which gives the impression in his penultimate scene of an American bureaucrat making a back-door deal. There is also the sobriquet of "the German Sgt. York" bestowed upon Fredrick Zoller/Daniel Brühl, linking the German marksman hero to the American marksman hero of WW I (as well as the patriotic Gary Cooper film of 1941). There are also the film's frequent references to African Americans and Native Americans, reminding us of America's own history of racism. The latter in particular is noteworthy for Raine's identification of them as a violent racial other, his utilization of terror tactics associated by Raine exclusively with his Apache racial heritage. (Significantly, just before initiating the theatre massacre, Shosanna daubs two war paint-like streaks of blush upon her cheeks).

What Tarantino is seemingly attempting to do in *Basterds* is overhaul completely the metanarrative of national identity of the postwar democracies: the history of their wartime activities in the fight against fascism. In this, *Basterds* goes further than the late 60s cycle of war films that follow *The Dirty Dozen*, *Basterds* chief generic referent. The 60s cycle is noteworthy not only for its rewriting of history but its diminishing of the Nazis as an ideological threat. In *The Dirty Dozen*, etc. the Nazis are reduced to stage machinery and the only political realities to which the cycle refers are contemporaneous ones. Example: The malcontents of *The Dirty Dozen* represent every racial group fighting for civil rights in the 1960s. Equally representative of this trend is the ancillary troop lead by Donald Sutherland in *Kelly's Heroes* (1970) which is essentially a group of long-haired 60s dropouts transposed to wartime France.

Unlike its 60s ancestors, *Basterds* foregrounds the historical reality of the Nazi threat in its very first scene, a threat that is not only to human life but more ephemeral aspects of life, like human dignity. The moral crisis into which the hapless French farmer is plunged represents almost the last instance in the film in which an ethical dilemma is not met with decisive action. In almost every case thereafter, that action is either deadly or "cruel and unusual". In the morally corrupt (rather than, I think, morally ambiguous) world of *Basterds* it is only the browbeaten French

farmer who represents anything that resembles human values.

It could certainly be argued that a break-a-few-eggs philosophy of war is being promoted here rather than a critique of violent retaliation: The film's reference to the O.S.S. (from which the Basterds are recruited), forerunner of our shadowy CIA, might suggest just such a reading. But the CIA-via-O.S.S. reference might equally imply a critique of political opportunism through a contemporary parallel: The swift institutionalization in peace time of an extra-Constitutional government entity created to meet a wartime need anticipates the current erosion of civil liberties in the U.S., initiated originally in response to the terror attacks of 9/11 but continuing in a never-ending War on Terrorism.

Thus, if *Basterds* acknowledges the historical threat of the fascist state as a reality, like its 60s ancestors its narrative seems generated by contemporaneous political and cultural realities. Rather than symptomatic of the excesses of the Bush era *Basterds* seems a critical response to them. Whatever Tarantino's intent, the film's usefulness lies in the parallels to be drawn between 1) the historic German dictatorship and the recent expansion of executive powers under the Bush administration and 2) the deployment of torture and terror by the U.S. military in the film and the recent examples of both sanctioned and unsanctioned torture and unusual punishment by the U.S. government and its representatives and allies.

But Tarantino extends his critique beyond the actions of the state to the populace, recognizing the shared culture of violence that joins the two and facilitates (or at least nullifies resistance to) the actions of the state. I have Jesse Walker's review of *Basterds* on *reasononline* to thank for opening my eyes on several crucial points in the film not least of which is the visual content of the fictional propaganda film *Nation's Pride*. As he notes, the soon-to-be-exterminated German audience (including Hitler himself) is enjoying a film which is notably graphic in its violence. Given, however, the film's dissolution of the division between 'us' and 'them', the implied critique extends to the contemporary American viewer. In fact, the fictional film's violence, far more detailed than any war film of that era, brings to mind not only such masters of violence as Tarantino and Roth but the relentless opening scene of Spielberg's otherwise politically conventional war film, *Saving Private Ryan*.

But Tarantino extends his critique even further. As with the character played by Eli Roth, the biographical data of Commander Aldo Raine clearly derives from the director himself (Tennessee birth, Native American racial heritage) with Brad Pitt even seemingly mimicking Tarantino's trademark grin. The rope burns around the character's neck (suggesting a botched lynching by southern terrorists) also seem to refer to Tarantino's personal revenge fantasy (to which *Basterds* articles often refer) against the Ku Klux Klan. Given his narrative doubling with Col. Landa, it seems inescapable that Tarantino's implied judgment of Raine does not contain an element of self-indictment. (The name "Aldo Raine" possibly refers to the ruthless troop leader played by Aldo Ray in Raoul Walsh's war film *The Naked and the Dead*, who ends up shot in the back by one of his men).

If I have any reservations concerning Tarantino's intent they derive in part from this self-referencing which might suggest a personal investment in the character as hero. There is also Shosanna's death, murdered by Zoller at the very moment when she lets down her defenses and shows compassion for the wounded soldier. Together these might suggest a more





*Inglourious Basterds*

ambiguous response to violent retaliation at work in the film. But all reservations are mollified by the film's magnificent conclusion, where Tarantino's judgment of the three levels at which government-sanctioned violence operates—the state, the culture, the individual—are joined.

Regarding state culpability, as the torture of Landa (as well as the killing and scalping of the completely inconsequential Pvt. Herrman/Michael Kranz) is done against orders, the state is seemingly not implicated in this concluding atrocity. But it is the state's *prior* sanctioning of torture and terror that now facilitates Raine's renegade vigilantism. The impression given at the conclusion is that the military establishment that had formerly sanctioned Raine's terrorism has loosed a one-man anti-Nazi crusade upon an unsuspecting postwar world.

The audience too (many of its members having come desiring violent content from Tarantino) is implicated in the final atrocity. Exasperated by Landa's bureaucratic maneuvers that will allow him to evade any postwar punishment for his crimes against humanity, Tarantino carefully increases audience antipathy toward the character to the point that we along with Raine want him to suffer some form of reprisal. (Is Tarantino here playing on popular appeals to the Obama administration to investigate the prior administration's political investment in torture?) Having

engaged our desire for retaliation (and continuing the critique begun in the theatre scene of the culture of violence) Tarantino punishes us by presenting in graphic detail all we had been denied/spared in the branding of Pvt. Butz: Placing the viewer in Raine's position they are *our* hands doing the cutting.

With the death of the Nazi high command and the war (in essence) over, Raine's actions can no longer be justified by the war effort: His reliance upon terror tactics have, from start to finish, accorded with a *personal* philosophy, his actions finally superseding his military commitment and countermanding orders. The doubling of Raine and Landa throughout the film culminates here in vivisection: The act that marks Landa forever as a Nazi also marks Raine as his equal in viciousness and joins them in blood. But, given the reflexive relationship of director to Raine, Tarantino clearly implicates himself too in the branding of Landa, a reading of the conclusion seemingly confirmed when Raine refers to the branding as a work of art ("my masterpiece").

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# Trace and Travesty

HOW THE COLUMBUS OF SEX  
BECAME MY SECRET LIFE

BY STEPHEN BROOMER

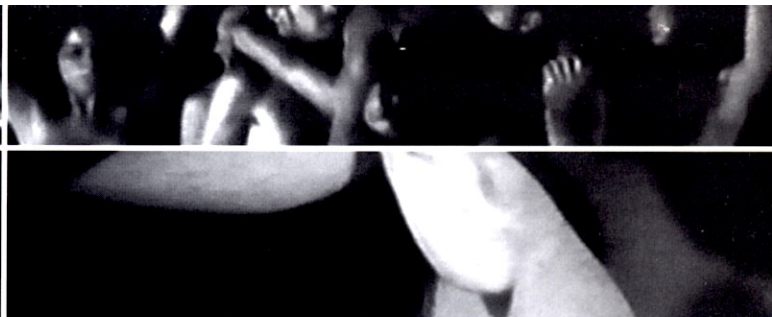
Hamilton's McMaster University of the mid-1960s had a thriving campus art scene. The annual arts festival attracted prestigious and daring North American guests, such as Amiri Baraka, Cannonball Adderly, Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground, and Leslie Fiedler among others. In 1966, mature student John Hofsess, a frequent contributor to the campus newspaper, began to produce 8mm and then 16mm films. Hofsess founded an organization of student filmmakers called the McMaster Film Board (MFB), a group funded by the student union. Hofsess's interests in sexual revolution and American underground art made for a tense relationship between the McMaster Film Board and the student union. Through the McMaster Film Board, John Hofsess began *Palace of Pleasure* (1966/67), a series of experimental films. Intended as a trilogy, only two parts were completed.

The films were designed as showcases for Hofsess's concept of 'cinematherapy,'<sup>1</sup> an experiment that combined ideas from contemporary media—from Warhol and McLuhan—with ideas gleaned from writings on psychoanalytic liberation. His project was similar, if more in spirit than practice, to Wilhelm Reich's orgasm theory, wherein the organism was freed from its neurosis through the total release of dammed-up orgastic energies. Reich envisioned a healthy and functional mankind that could build a sex-positive society away from the tyranny of repressive institutions. Hofsess saw his films operating in opposition to a filmmaker such as Jack Smith (*Flaming Creatures*), whose shocking work, in Hofsess's estimation, could only reinforce the alienation of the neurotic and their bond to the repressive institution. The ideas underlying the productions were Hofsess's own, but the first part (*Redpath 25*) was a collaboration between Hofsess, McMaster art community organizer Patricia Murphy, who starred in it, and Robin Hilborn, a science student who applied bleach effects during the film's processing. The second and more substantial part of the trilogy (*Black Zero*) was announced in the student press as being co-directed by McMaster Film Board president Peter Rowe, who was primarily responsible for the cinematography. Hofsess had also cast members of the McMaster Dramatic Society, specifically its director David Martin, who would go on to make a film with the McMaster Film Board titled *To Paint the Park* (1968), a single-screen experimental narrative that was heavily influenced by Hofsess's work. Martin's performance in *Black Zero*, accord-

ing to Hofsess's model of therapeutic film form, was "flattened out" in editing. The film was presented in dual projection: tension would dissipate between the two screens. The film acts as a sensual experience by emancipating the viewer from the expectations placed on them by the narrative tradition, their view of the film disrupted by the intentional compromise of performance elements as well as frequent obstructions of kaleidoscopic psychedelic images and appropriated magazine advertisements. *Palace of Pleasure* is an auteur work, supported through a manifesto that Hofsess contributed to *Take One Magazine* that expressed his unique aesthetic perspective ("Toward a New Voluptuary: From the Black Zero Notebook"), but it was made with conscious attention to the participation of others, in the spirit of collaborative practice. Hofsess showed a dedication to filmmaking as a social experience, here as well as in his community work as founder of the McMaster Film Board,

The film toured the underground film circuit gaining strong endorsements from international experimental cinema commentators such as Jonas Mekas and Gene Youngblood, and on the Canadian front from CFI curator Peter Morris and journalist Clyde Gilmour. It was a surprising financial success, turning a profit for both its first distributor (Film Canada in Toronto) and its second (Aardvark Films in Chicago). Hofsess left Ontario in 1967 to manage the Aardvark Cinematheque in Chicago's Oldtown, collaborating with Patricia Murphy and Chicago experimental filmmaker Ronald Nameth on completing the *Palace of Pleasure* trilogy. The leadership of the McMaster Film Board passed from himself and Peter Rowe to David Martin. There had been significant tensions over expenses during Hofsess and Rowe's term. By the end of March 1968 the student union shut down the McMaster Film Board. Shortly thereafter, music student Ivan Reitman approached the student union asking for an opportunity to reform the board. They agreed, and the resulting film, *Orientation* (1968), became a success on campus. It was later sold for theatrical distribution with 20th Century Fox's Canadian run of *John and Mary* (1969). Subsequent to this, Reitman with collaborators Dan Goldberg, Eugene Levy and Dennis Matheson formed the new core of the McMaster Film Board, which was restructured as a transparent democratic body with conventional narrative film production as its primary interest. Hofsess continued to encourage the board, writing a positive review of Reitman's *Orientation* in *Take One*.





Hofsess returned to Hamilton without having completed the *Palace of Pleasure* trilogy. Reitman and Goldberg had been telling the McMaster student press of the ambitions of the new MFB, stating their interest in making a feature film. How the three came to collaborate on a project is unclear, but they decided to combine their efforts—Hofsess as director, Reitman and Goldberg as producers—on a film titled *Columbus of Sex*, based on the notorious Victorian pornographic memoir *My Secret Life*, written by the anonymous Walter. This collaboration between Hofsess, Reitman and Goldberg was founded on a mutual incomprehension of what one another stood for. This is best demonstrated in Reitman's student film *Orientation*, where a Hofsess-like figure dictates the amount of whipped cream to be applied to the breasts of a co-ed (this parodies a scene from the *Redpath 25* segment of *Palace of Pleasure*). Reitman depicts Hofsess as a monomaniac, who commands the film's protagonist (Dan Goldberg) to pick up a boom pole and declares, "I can use you." Hofsess's film aesthetic had been informed by thinkers such as Wilhelm Reich, Carl Jung and Norman O. Brown, and by the literature that had been issuing from Grove Press through the 1960s. Reitman and Goldberg, on the other hand, wanted to create popular entertainment that was coincidentally anti-art and anti-intellectual—one sees this trend continue throughout their careers, as the architects of the frat comedy. What would unify these three figures, Hofsess invested in underground art, Reitman and Goldberg invested in commercial filmmaking? The climate of libertine wellness endorsed in the writings of Timothy Leary, or perhaps the Playboy philosophy of Hugh Hefner. Hefner's writings offered Rat Pack therapy, a live-and-let-live bon vivant lifestyle. All three could probably agree that this film was marketable from this position of hip excess, which could find form in a feature film that would retain the therapeutic aesthetic of Hofsess's prior work while being linked to commercial culture, whether starting on the gallery and campus circuit that Hofsess had desired, or the soft-core porn theaters where a heavily modified *Columbus of Sex* would eventually premiere.

### The Production and Seizure of *Columbus of Sex*

*Columbus of Sex* was filmed in the summer of 1969. From late May to July, Hofsess mobilized a crew around Hamilton and Southern Ontario, filming with a cast of McMaster students and local actors. Much of the cast was borrowed from the McMaster Dramatic Society, including Leon Jervis, who had previously appeared in an MFB film directed by Eugene Levy (*Garbage*). Here, Jervis played the lead as the young body of Walter, the anonymous Victorian narrator. Rob Fothergill, the first president of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center, narrated as Walter's voice on the soundtrack. As with *Palace of Pleasure*, the film was shot for two screens. Student actors gathered in the home of Professor Gordon Vichert, miming sexual encounters in tableau, photographed by Hofsess to accompany the bawdy text. In the film, these images

would be transformed by some 600 two-second lap dissolves.

Some cast members opted out at the suggestion of what would become known as the "beach scene," which was filmed on the night of July 21. Naked men and women are on a beach, apparently lit by bonfires, and all variations of partners would touch their genitals together while dancing or lying down, paired off and positioned into horizontal piles. Hofsess was not planning an accurate adaptation of the book. He was incorporating distancing techniques—such as a lengthy and intentionally non-erotic sequence of a couple undressing. He wanted to demystify the world of sex, to remove the guilt and stigma of the act by stripping it down to a practice. Through cinematotherapy, Hofsess believed that he could liberate his audience's sexual inhibitions and anxieties.

*Columbus of Sex* was brought to McMaster for a preview screening. The filmmakers planned to take the film to the Ontario Board of Censors to gain special permission to tour it to campuses, but had not yet secured such permission. Their intention was to build a following for the film by screening it only for an audience of university students and faculty. Reitman told *The Hamilton Spectator* some days after the screening that "[t]he idea of showing it to the Mac community was to gauge their reaction to the film."<sup>2</sup> On the evening of August 8, 1969, Goldberg, Hofsess, and Reitman first publicly exhibited *Columbus of Sex* at McMaster University. An audience of about 300 students and faculty filled the theater. In attendance was Rein Ende, once a writer and photographer for the *McMaster Silhouette* in the early 1960s, where his nickname in the paper's production notes read Rein 'the Living' Ende. In the interim he had become a French teacher at W.H. Ballard Elementary School, and he was a former employee of the Hamilton police. Gary Kellam, another public school teacher, accompanied Ende to the screening.

Kellam would later write to the *Hamilton Spectator* of what he saw: "Two projectors threw simultaneous black-and-white and color pictures on a screen to the accompanying taped soundtrack of some male reading selections from 'My Secret Life,' the memoirs of an individual known as 'Walter, the English Casanova.' The images on the screen went through most of the erotic gyrations possible to the human body and a fairly active imagination, and through the permutations and combinations of male-female, male-male, female-female, and mixed group love-making."<sup>3</sup>

Rein Ende gave his account to the *McMaster Silhouette*: "Both of us watched the first showing and were quite impressed by certain sequences that showed definite artistic talent. I am sure that Mr. Kellam would agree with me that the effect of the film was spoiled by some poorly directed scenes, the lack of definite continuity, and the rather careless synchronization of the two images with each other and with the sound track. Without the few excellent sequences, it would have been easy to dismiss the entire production as modern producers [sic]. Because the well-done scenes were present, I feel it a shame



that their talent was not shown throughout the entire film."<sup>4</sup>

After the first screening, Ende and Kellam both went to the police and spoke with Lieutenant Tom O'Connell. The second screening began with an audience of about 250 people. O'Connell and other members of the Vice Squad arrived at McMaster at 10:20 and watched an estimated 20 minutes of the film before ordering that it be turned off. The audience hissed and booed at them as they seized the reels, the sound recording, even the projectors themselves. The officers found Ivan Reitman in the projection booth, and Dan Goldberg in the lobby selling tickets. They placed the producers and Hofsess under arrest.

At the police station, Goldberg, Hofsess, and Reitman endured further humiliation. In Hofsess's account, the arresting vice squad policemen told the three that their film was "fit only for fucking perverts" and "imbecile masturbators." The arresting officers told others on duty of the film as they fingerprinted and photographed the filmmakers. "There's this scene where a woman seduces a priest and sucks his rosary." Another exclaimed, "Sucks his what?" Laughter ensued. Another officer spoke to the filmmakers: "Did you know that I saw a girl leaving the auditorium with her boyfriend..." He pointed to Goldberg and continued, "And I believe they were of your ... faith, you know what I mean? And *that* girl was in tears." This caught the attention of yet another officer. He told the room, "If any boy took my daughter to see such filth, he'd end up in the hospital."<sup>5</sup>

The three were released without bail. A sergeant from the vice squad told reporters, "We're going to be just too busy to look at dirty pictures this week." Contrary to the sergeant's remark, the police were not too busy to look at dirty pictures: they had not only screened the film that week, but some had brought their wives and other members of the community. On August 20, the men were formally charged with making and exhibiting an obscene movie, and two days later were freed on \$500 bail.

### The Trial

When confronted with Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* in 1927, the British Board of Film Censors ruled: "[t]he film is so cryptic as to be almost meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable."<sup>6</sup> As the *Columbus of Sex* trial began the following May, it soon became clear that the prosecution witnesses, composed entirely of the Hamiltonian working and middle class, were perplexed by Hofsess's film. Ende and Kellam began back-peddling on their accusations of obscenity, but the witnesses, who had been shown the film by the police in the weeks following its premiere, stood by those accusations. Some pointed to the commingling of alcohol with sex in the film, others to the relationship between religion and sex (the aforementioned 'priest' scene). None of these witnesses were in the audience on the night of the screening; the film was not made to cater to them and they were unlikely to be receptive to its content. One witness testified, "the film is explicitly about sex. The title is *The Columbus of Sex* and I don't know what could be more explicit than that. And furthermore, it deals with just that subject. My understanding of the law is that therefore this film is obscene."<sup>7</sup>

Hofsess spent the months prior to the trial building a collection of esteemed defense witnesses. Among those who had agreed to testify on the film's behalf were Peter Morris, Pierre

Burton, Norman Shrive, and Joan Fox, all intellectuals with a collective investment in the defense of culture. Others who had expressed an interest in speaking in the film's defense included Mordecai Richler and Robert Fulford. Hofsess was also approaching Americans such as Andrew Sarris and Susan Sontag. On the stand, Joan Fox praised the narration for its delicacy, and claimed that explicit details of sex were not obscene in the context of the film. "You couldn't take it to Yonge Street and make a million showing it to the public. It is not crass and vulgar enough. It's esthetic and experimental ... it's not something you can go to for kicks unless you're really hung up."<sup>8</sup> At the outset of the trial, charges against Hofsess were dropped on a technicality: the prosecution had failed to prove that the John Hofsess in court was the same credited on the film. Nevertheless, he remained involved, arranging expert testimony in defense of his producers and his film, and later producing a cover story for *Saturday Night Magazine* in the aftermath of the trial ("The Witchcraft of Obscenity") and collecting material for a book project on the trial (*The Night They Raided McMaster*).

The judge dismissed the charge against Reitman and Goldberg of distributing an obscene film for lack of evidence. Four other charges relating to the production of an obscene document remained. On May 27, the trial ended. Defense attorney John Bowlby gave his submissions for the defence, arguing that the issue of obscenity does not belong in the court because it forces the onus of evidence onto the defence. He presented the principle of reasonable doubt. "In obscene literature cases, the book is filed and then all eyes turn to the accused as if to say 'Now you prove that isn't obscene.' All the accused have to do is raise a reasonable doubt ... If art is not art society discards it not because of judicial decree, but because that which has no merit has never endured."<sup>9</sup> The area of the Criminal Code that was being tested in this case gave the courts the right to interfere with the freedom of literary expression and artistic development, and for this reason, Bowlby claimed that the case before the court was one of the most important trials that could take place in Canada. In his view, such arbitrary prosecutions could discourage artistic experimentation. He argued that a new art form—such as film, specifically Hofsess's dual screen multimedia treatment of film—tends to confuse and therefore frighten the public. Crown witnesses, in their testimony, had repeatedly identified the twin screen film form as an offensive or obscene gesture. As Bowlby described it, "[t]hey're saying 'this is an art form that is new that I don't understand, so I will draw away from it.'"<sup>10</sup> Bowlby closed saying that no evidence had been presented by the Crown to show that the film was made for any part of the community other than the university. When discussion of the screens entered the court, the prosecution of *The Columbus of Sex* became focused on the film's form instead of its content. It became the prosecution of a discontinuous environment, as if the prosecution of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* had been focused on the author's cut-up technique instead of the book's content.<sup>11</sup>

The judge ruled in favour of the prosecution, finding Reitman and Goldberg guilty and sentencing them to one year of probation and a \$300 fine. In his closing statement, he affirmed the prosecutor's belief that the greater community at large dictates what is and is not illegal, and that the moral standards of the university must adhere to the laws of Hamilton, Ontario. In accordance with this, the judge stated that he did



not believe the defense had adequately demonstrated that the film served the public good. Ivan Reitman and Dan Goldberg purchased Hofsess's share of the film from him when his legal woes were severely impacting his finances. Even before the trial had begun, Reitman and Goldberg entered negotiations to sell the film to Jack Harris Enterprises. *Columbus of Sex* had caught Jack Harris's eye when *Variety* ran a short piece on it and its legal troubles. Harris, best remembered for *The Blob* (1958), knew that any banned film already had a counterculture niche, and that the source material the film was tied to made it a potential hit for the erotica market. Harris purchased the film and worked with Reitman and Goldberg to transform it into something marketable. Their changes included shooting a substantial part of the new film in California, giving Rob Fothergill's narrator an older body, that of Jack Woods, a burly California film editor,<sup>12</sup> and removing Hofsess's name as director and replacing it with the name Leland R. Thomas.

*My Secret Life* opened in New York City on April 19, 1971, at Loews State 2 and Loews Orpheum. Harris's retitled, single-screen version of *Columbus of Sex* had received an X classification from the Motion Picture Association of America. Posters sported the tagline: "every word, every situation unchanged as the Erotic Best Seller comes to the screen." The day after it opened, Vincent Canby wrote that it lacked the "social, psychological and historical importance" of its source material.<sup>13</sup> After the details of the film's sale—to which Hofsess was not party—were revealed to him, Hofsess responded with a letter to the editor, apologizing to those who had spoken in his defense at trial and confirming that a defense was no longer possible. He wrote, "Mr. Reitman has made it clear [...] that an undue exploitation of sex was indeed his objective and accomplished aim before the trial began."<sup>14</sup> Harris claimed that the film only contained 20 percent of the original McMaster print footage. Reitman contested that the film was 65 percent McMaster, 35 percent Harris. Fothergill, who had been paid to do a raunchier version of his reading, said that his reading was half new, half old.

Could this sale have occurred if not for the arrest? Had the work remained in shared ownership with John Hofsess and never seized by the Hamilton vice squad, it would more likely have found a home in the underground film community in distribution with the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. I have suggested that the partnership between Hofsess and his producers was founded on a form of mutual incomprehension—neither side fully understanding the motives of the other—but the fate of *Columbus of Sex* is conceived outside of this discord between commercial and artistic practices. This is a case of pornography by government. Reitman himself stated as much to the *Globe and Mail's* Betty Lee: "I think there's no doubt that even though they intended quite the opposite, the police and the courts in Hamilton made *Columbus of Sex* a highly exploitable property."<sup>15</sup> There is no evidence that the possibility of a sale to Jack Harris or the re-editing of the film as soft-core pornography had occurred to the filmmakers before the police declared it pornographic and had them arrested. Jack Harris was attracted to the project not by its source material or its execution, which he publicly decried as dreadful, but by the charges against it. To the public that testified against the filmmakers, a police accusation was as righteous as a verdict. That same public was hostile to and ignorant of the elaborate explanations the filmmaker offered, not knowing what therapeutic cinema could be but the words of some vain pornographer.

## My Secret Life

"This memoir explored every latitude of love, mapped and charted the world of sex, guided by a sense of wonder that overcame prejudice, a sense of uncompromising integrity that overcame all forms of hypocrisy and whose humanistic philosophy with its main principles of honesty and tolerance form the basis of this film experience."

*My Secret Life* begins with this text. The credits that follow run atop details from a 19th Century illustration of rural life. The villagers dress and undress, bathe, embrace, peer from windows and leer at each other caught in liaisons. *Columbus of Sex* claimed to be in favor of the wholesomeness of sexuality unhindered by false morality. *My Secret Life* retains some of this, but the final film has been marked by Jack Harris' exploitation filmmaking and Ivan Reitman's conventional narrative filmmaking, neither of which suggest the claimed political and social values of Hofsess's film. This is apparent in scenes that involve Jack Woods, and in the comedic scenes that have a strong resemblance, in form and content, to Reitman's own student filmmaking. It can be presumed from letters Hofsess wrote to Fothergill in this period that he felt excluded from much of the filmmaking process, even before the details of the sale were revealed. It is my intention here to distinguish some materials that reflect Hofsess's film (and his ideas about film form) from those of Harris.

The *Variety* article that had caught Harris's attention, evidently written by Hofsess, described *Columbus of Sex* as "represent[ing] a departure for sexploitation fare with a tone and attitude that fall between sex education documentary and sophisticated comedy, and although it tends to grow indulgent about the 'wholesomeness' of all sexual behavior, it has probably earned itself the right to the subtitle, 'a therapeutic film experience.'"<sup>16</sup> Absent from *My Secret Life* is any indication of that therapeutic ideal. The form of *Columbus of Sex* is not intact. Some scenes are certainly derived from it. Others are edited in opposition to Hofsess's stream-of-consciousness editing (which in *Palace* might recall Jonas Mekas's diary films) as well as his flattening of actor's performances through discontinuous editing. It is ultimately the reconstruction of the film within narrative convention that makes the execution of *My Secret Life* a violation of the ideals of *Columbus of Sex*.

*My Secret Life* is composed as a series of narrative sequences or narrated tableaux, wrapping around a framing device wherein Walter, embodied by Jack Woods and narrated by Rob Fothergill, reflects on his life-long study of human sexuality. Jack Woods appears as the aged body of the narrator, representing formal Victorian pomposity with pipe and red bathrobe. As the introductory scene ends, Walter opens his bathrobe and admires his body in a distorted mirror. The narration in this scene describes Walter's desire to "develop an objective and pragmatic approach to sex." By designating an aged body for the narrator and positioning it in a framing device, Harris and company derail one of the functions of Hofsess's therapeutic cinema: its disregard for linearity. When Hofsess originally made *Redpath 25*, it was a single-screen film, and he only added a second screen after *Black Zero* was made in dual projection. Although his dual screen aesthetic directly mocks linearity, the single-screen therapeutic film resists linearity as well. Fothergill's voice was intended as a component of a multimedia work.



Cinematherapy films are aggressively non-narrative, even as narrative components circulate through them. "The films are not actor's vehicles," wrote Hofsess in his manifesto, but Harris made Hofsess's film into an actor's vehicle, for Fothergill, Woods, and Jervis. The embodiment of the narrator and the bookends that Old Walter's scenes provide tame the film into conventional narrative terms.

Walter recalls his sexual education from his childhood introduction to human plumbing, experiences with nurses and animals to his first sexual conquest, the seduction of a servant. To this point, much of the material has been Hofsess's—primarily static tableaux of young nude partners, each image dissolving into the next rapidly. As the voice on the soundtrack tells of a seduction however, the fading tableaux offer a contradictory sensuality recalling the discontinuous impressionism of Hofsess's prior films. In more conventional scenes, the narration loses whatever irony it may have had in its non-narrative context. Walter solicits a young woman, "fucking" her in the forest. The previous tableau format is replaced with images of people in period dress photographed through a soft, oiled lens. The girl's sister observes, and so Walter decides that he must seduce her to prevent her from speaking of it to their parents. Walter's narration uses the dubious term 'seduction,' but a contemporary view would readily interpret the narration as describing acts of rape, appallingly countered on screen with images of playful lovers.

Young Walter, in such conventional narrative scenes—all presumably the work of Ivan Reitman—swims in sunlit ponds and frolics in dense forests. His sexual conquests are presented as consensual and carefree in sharp contrast to the narration. Old Walter humiliates women—squirting a soft, milk-filled dildo in the face of one; stuffing a black woman's vagina with coins to see how many coins it will hold. These scenes end with both Walter and his lovers laughing heartily at his playfulness. Appalling as it may seem, Young Walter represents a kind of wholesome virility. His partners on screen eagerly consent even as the narrator speaks of forcing them. This is still the protagonist of the frat comedy, his pursuit of sex exaggerated for (unfunny, misogynistic) comic effect. An example: Young Walter invades a stranger's home in order to rape his servant. He is thwarted when he finds that the servant has been fitted with a chastity belt. But Old Walter, on his California set, is celebrated as a strong, cultured, charming man. He is the mature result of Young Walter's conquests. His lovers endure and even enjoy their objectification, because their enjoyment supports the consensual appearance of other scenes in the film.

The tableau sequences, which I am attributing to Hofsess based entirely on court documents and trial correspondence, are sensuous in a way that contradicts the grotesque narration: the first non-consensual sex act is described, defended as 'seduction,' but is partnered to still images of bodies consenting to one another, flesh on flesh, photographed ambiguously. These scenes became a matter of some confusion for the witnesses at the trial, one claiming that the filmmakers had included a graphic act of fellatio, which Hofsess denied was there. Such is the visual character of these scenes, which by virtue of that testimony seems to share the ambiguous vision of Willard Maas's *The Geography of the Body* (1943). In Maas's film, the nude is photographed at such magnification that it becomes a landscape. Hofsess's approach evokes the flattened performances of his cinematherapy. Were the remaining tableaux presented against a second set of images, the resulting asynchro-

nous diptych would recall *Palace of Pleasure*. In *My Secret Life*, these scenes malfunction. Unlike the Harris and Reitman contributions, which were made for single-screen projection, these sequences, like Fothergill's disembodied narrator, were intended as part of a multimedia collage. Their hypnotic construction, like the dual screen format, rebels against linearity, and the boredom and indifference with which audiences met *My Secret Life* recalls Joan Fox's testimony to the film's unsuitability as pornography. The scenes are not strictly tableaux: some contain extensive movement—hands caressing, bodies moving rhythmically against each other—but that movement is subtle, with genitalia often unseen or kept in shadow.

Walter's sex project is encyclopedic as well as autobiographical, and there are stretches of operational description of sex acts accompanied by images of erotic paintings, sketches and sculptures. These recall another component of *Columbus of Sex* that came up at the trial: the ironic health film, which would weave in and out of the dual screens. As Hofsess's *Black Zero* had used article headlines, book covers, and images from magazines, *Columbus of Sex* used "educational" sequences such as this—likely very close to the series and sync in which they are found here (albeit, again, with a second screen to de-centre the viewer's attention).<sup>17</sup> In these scenes, Walter speaks of the "false morality" of repressive society, a topic shared by *Columbus of Sex* and *Palace of Pleasure*—and coming in part from the influence of Wilhelm Reich, whose work opposed the societal negation of the erotic drive. One might interpret Walter's recollections of sexual encounters as being in the interest of free love—he is a Columbus who dares to oppose the sexual morality of his day, becoming a Casanova whose conquests ignore race, gender and class. But these accounts are troubling. Walter is no liberator. At times he simply forces himself on others. With a kind of Victorian eloquence, he justifies rape.

The notorious beach scene is recycled from *Columbus of Sex* to serve as the finale of *My Secret Life*. A group of bohemian youths perform a modern dance, their bodies on one another, their genitals touching. As it begins the dancers carry the bodies of two lovers, stacked atop one another, into a circle and lay them down and spread out. The dancers, among them the Young Walter, extend their arms into the air, and then retract them to their sides as they separate into pairs. The women lie down on top of the men, their genitals meeting but their heads at opposite ends of their embrace. A dissolve comes and the viewer sees that the scene is lit by a series of bonfires and that these dancers are standing on sand. Young Walter begins to depart from them. The dancers follow, their arms reaching out to him. Walter reads, "I break with the past. My amatory career is over, my secret life finished. My philosophy remains the same. My deeds leave me no regret, with the exception perhaps of a very few. Would that I were young enough to continue in the same course, that all might happen to me over again. But age forbids, duty forbids, affection forbids. Eros adieu." Young Walter comes around to the other side of the campfire and his companions recede out of frame. He stands shivering by the fire. There is an artificial post-production zoom on this image of naked Young Walter and a match fade that turns the beach at night into the California set where *My Secret Life* began, the parlor of Old Walter. The fade turns young Walter old, turns Leon Jervis into Jack Woods, his robe again open, their naked bodies bridging *Columbus of Sex* and *My Secret Life*. It is, somehow, the original film that loses its 'innocence.'



What can *My Secret Life* be, in therapeutic terms, but a treatment derailed through the intervention of the repressive system? The court reads from *Columbus of Sex* its message of the wholesomeness of sex. One does not see *My Secret Life* commemorated as a work of Canadian film art or as an example of Reitman and Goldberg's supreme business savvy. Despite its beginnings in *Columbus of Sex*, *My Secret Life* repudiates moral liberation for the business model. In the process, an artwork is transformed, through legislation and marketing, into an object that would reinforce the shame of pleasure that the original wished to challenge. *Columbus of Sex* reportedly contested the taboos of pleasure and endorsed a wholesome, mutual, haptic sexuality unhindered by social convention. *My Secret Life* exploits these ideas. It only coincidentally endorses the humanistic principles that the opening title card claims as the film's own. *Columbus of Sex* was intended to inspire its audience toward sexual freedom. As a component of *My Secret Life*, *Columbus* was poorly fitted to the market that had purchased and re-engineered it, its inspirational potential reduced to that of any work of commercial erotica.

### Post-script

The account of the trial and its aftermath found in this essay are taken from a variety of news sources. As a matter of housekeeping the government destroyed the trial transcripts, and no copy of Hofsess's manuscript-in-progress is known to exist. Nowhere has the trial and subsequent sale of *Columbus of Sex* been more extensively recounted than in Malcolm Dean's *Censored! Only in Canada*. Even there, despite the precedence the trial represented for Canadian film art, Dean dedicates little time or accuracy to his account of the controversy, showing a greater investment in detailing the Canadian censorship of foreign works such as *Last Tango in Paris*. The majority of Dean's coverage is paraphrased from John Hofsess's "The Witchcraft of Obscenity." George Melnyk's *100 Years of Canadian Cinema* excludes not only *Columbus of Sex*, but also the McMaster Film Board—and it does so, no doubt, as a result of the historical neglect that these subjects have endured in the four decades since their creation. *Columbus of Sex* becomes a minor aside in Ivan Reitman's biography. The mentions that the work earns in histories of Hamilton and of Canadian film are vague and tend toward inaccuracy. More often than not, Hofsess is excluded entirely from references to the work, and *Columbus of Sex* is written off as an exploitation film.

With no existing copy of the film on hand, without the ability to screen it or even to verify what has been said of it, it may seem to some an empty task to try to keep the work within our knowledge of the evolution of Canadian cinema. It is a critical juncture in the development of the Canadian art film and the Canadian film industry in which they both intersect and divide. It is also a key text in on-going issues of censorship in the Canadian film industry.

Almost four decades after these filmmakers were arrested and tried for their part in making *Columbus of Sex*, there were cries in Parliament over another so-called obscene work, Martin Gero's *Young People Fucking* (2007). What began as a complaint over the role of public funding in the creation of so provocatively titled a work ended with the Canadian film and television community protesting the legislated manifestation of that objection, Bill C-10, as an act of pre-censorship, a measure that through fear could manipulate the creation of media in

Canada. The threat of Bill C-10 was of one tax credit withdrawal, reminding the Canadian film community of its dependence on subsidy. Concerned parties were not acting in fear of fines, imprisonment, or the outlawing and destruction of their work. John Hofsess' *Columbus of Sex*, commemorated through accounts of its trial or through the bruised palimpsest that's left of it, demonstrates the consequences of censorship on the individual artist. Regardless of his producers' actions, it was the justice system, the police and the court, that transformed *Columbus of Sex* into pornography. Until an original print of the dual-screen *Columbus of Sex* is located, it is impossible to create an argument for its artistic merit. It is equally impossible to discard it as a work of pornography.

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### Notes

- 1 The significance and value of this unique contribution to film form has been somewhat diluted by a self-help practice called cinema therapy. This practice guides the user/patient through narrative films relevant to their neurotic experience in pursuit of self-esteem, catharsis and psychological well-being.
- 2 "Mac film seized by vice squad," *The Spectator* (Hamilton), August 9, 1969, 7.
- 3 Gary Kellam, "Sex movie not to his liking," (Letter to the Editor), *The Spectator* (Hamilton) August 14, 6.
- 4 Rein Ende, "Ende Denies Squealing," *The Silhouette* (McMaster), December 5, 1969, 4.
- 5 This account of the arrest is based on the account given in Hofsess's essay "The Witchcraft of Obscenity: Trial and Conviction of a Canadian Movie," *Saturday Night Magazine*, August 1970.
- 6 James Crighton Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913-1975*, London: Routledge, 1989, 39.
- 7 John Hofsess, "The Witchcraft of Obscenity: Trial and Conviction of a Canadian Movie."
- 8 Manny Escott, "Sex exploitation unartistic Pierre Berton tells court," *The Toronto Star*, May 21, 1970.
- 9 "Columbus awaits judgment," *The Spectator* (Hamilton), May 28, 1970, 7.
- 10 "Artistic merit beyond judicial decree, suggests defence," *The Spectator* (Hamilton), May 27, 1970, 7.
- 11 The prosecution of *Naked Lunch* as obscene is significant to this discussion as the last major literary censorship battle in the United States, and one relatively contemporary to the case at hand. *Naked Lunch* was banned in Boston in 1962, and the Massachusetts Supreme Court reversed that decision in 1966.
- 12 Jack Woods also collaborated with Harris on the 1970 American horror film *Equinox*. Like *Columbus of Sex*, *Equinox* was shot independently, then purchased and reassembled with new material by Harris and company. As the Chinese filmmaker Godfrey Ho and American filmmaker Al Adamson would later do, Harris was making a practice of purchasing bankrupt productions and cheaply reworking them for niche markets: *Equinox* for the drive-in crowd, *Columbus of Sex* for the porn crowd.
- 13 Vincent Canby, "Vapid Erotica," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1971, 51.
- 14 John Hofsess, "Columbus of Sex," [Letter to the Editor], *The Globe and Mail*, May 10, 1971, 6.
- 15 Betty Lee, "Columbus of Sex: an obscene movie reappears in a slicker package," *The Globe and Mail*, May 1, 1971, 27.
- 16 Review: *Columbus of Sex*, *Variety*, May 13, 1970, [www.variety.com/review/VE1117903391.html?categoryid=31&cs=1](http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117903391.html?categoryid=31&cs=1), accessed June 2009.
- 17 Another verification that these were components of *Columbus of Sex* comes in the form of the influence the film had at McMaster: G.W. Curran, a student filmmaker with the MFB, completed a film (*Civilization*) in the fall following the arrests that operates in the same visual idiom (recycling static historical images) but without the narration. Knowing this to be among the formal content of *Columbus of Sex* from Hofsess's trial correspondence and other reports, one can assume that Curran's film owes a formal debt to *Columbus of Sex*.



# Textures of Collaboration

POP MUSIC CULTURE AND THE EXPERIMENTAL FILMS OF  
ABIGAIL CHILD AND BILL MORRISON

BY CAROLYN ELERDING

Cinema possesses a rich history of collaboration between artists of sound, narrative, and image. However, traditional tendencies to perceive music as a strictly supportive background or accompaniment have been subjected to in-depth critique only recently. Abigail Child's interactions with musicians in *Is This What You Were Born For?* (1981–89) and Bill Morrison's partnership with composer Michael Gordon in *Decasia* (2001) exemplify (but by no means exhaust the possibilities of) the broader range of collaborative textures that cinema has always suggested. Not coincidentally, these works represent the influence on cinema of two popular music practices: the ubiquitous re-mixing that has emerged from hip-hop culture and the group composition typical of many rock bands.

*Decasia*



Abigail Child (also a poet, critic, and scholar) has had an influential career as an experimental filmmaker since the mid-1970s when she turned from professional documentary work to the creation of independent films focusing on gender, sexuality, class, and the critical possibilities of montage. Recycling found footage from a wide variety of sources, such as porn, industrial films, and home movies, and progressing cinematic techniques often associated primarily with the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, Child has created an *oeuvre* of incredible beauty and continuing social relevance. Her films are shown at major art museums and in experimental cinema venues and can be obtained through a variety of distribution channels. *Is This What You Were Born For?*, the series of short films Child created in the 1980s, underscores her exploration of interdisciplinary collaboration and these endeavors have had on her work.

Michael Gordon's award-winning career as a composer has resulted in a variety of notable intermedia collaborations, including for example operas with diegetic film components progressing beyond the more familiar application of projection as scenery and non-narrative music performances incorporating video. Gordon is a founding member of the highly regarded new music organization Bang on a Can, a group dedicated to facilitating the composition and performance of new music, often with an interdisciplinary dimension and independently of conservative academic contexts. *Decasia*, Gordon's internationally celebrated collaboration with filmmaker Bill Morrison, is a symphony for full orchestra paired with a montage of archival nitrate footage in various states of intriguing and evocative decomposition. The final version of the film, edited to fit the live recording of the symphony performance, was featured in the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. *Decasia* synaesthetically elucidates subtleties inherent to myriad generative tensions: progress/tradition, memory/time, darkness/illumination, and minimalism/totalism.

The styles of interaction under discussion here owe much to the downtown New York arts scene of the 1980s, by many accounts the heyday of pre-academic postmodernism in the United States. Prefacing Abigail Child's book, Tom Gunning provides a helpful overview of the context giving rise to this community of Ivy League expatriates:

The crashing of the romantic and idealist aspiration of the sixties counter-culture led many American avant-garde artists to look for a rigor of analysis to replace the highly individualistic and 'personalized' aspects of the Beats and of the youth culture the Beats in part inspired. Painting, as it moved into Minimalism, provided one alternative model. Just as important was a rediscovery of the art and theory of the Soviet literary avant-garde of the twenties, the constructivist ethos which proclaimed the importance of the revolutionary political context of artistic practice, and proposed a scientific analysis of the laws of art...<sup>1</sup>

The music group Bang on a Can was formed in New York in 1987 by Michael Gordon and some fellow recent graduates from the Yale School of Music, because their own musical experiences and needs were not reflected in the culture of "new music"—that is, contemporary composition in the academic conservatory tradition, what some might term "post-classical." The working methods of their "band" were similar to those of the rock groups they had listened to since childhood, and they favored a pluralist mentality over fragmenting and isolating style wars. They also embraced improvisation and electronics,



*Decasia*





*Decasia*

as well as the repetitious long durations of “process” music. Usually called minimalism, this genre has been celebrated as “a purely American art, free of modernist angst and inflected with pop optimism.”<sup>2</sup> It was partly inspired by the danceable rock grooves of the 1960s. Later, the direction of influence reversed: “...minimalism has marked rock, pop, and dance music from the Velvet Underground onward.”<sup>3</sup> Eventually, a style came to be associated with the highly successful, influential, and controversial Bang on a Can: a maximal approach to minimalism, in which very subtle details of timbre are used to articulate and enliven the surfaces of large structures based on very simple harmonic progressions. Morrison’s film *Decasia*, written in close dialogue with Michael Gordon and his music score, is also exemplary of minimalism’s slow and repetitious processes.

Many portions of the film series *Is This What You Were Born For?* by Abigail Child are maximally dense in texture of collaboration and of sound/image interaction. Collaboration has long been integral to Abigail Child’s practice. In her book *This Is*

*Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film*, Child has collected a variety of collaborative essays, each designed according to a different model of partnership: there are traditional interviews; a written correspondence later edited collaboratively in person; a remix of quotations from essays contributed to a specific forum; and essays in which, for instance, the identities of individual authors among a group has been completely obscured. Child also experiments with collaborative design in an outstandingly mindful and precise manner in her cinema collaborations with sound artists. It is clear that her experimental collaborations were made possible in large part by the social milieu of the vivacious art scenes of the ’70s and ’80s in San Francisco and especially downtown New York. She describes these havens as sites of “fervent dialogue, and intense collegiality.”<sup>4</sup> Art rock, punk, experimental cinema, freely improvised music, poetry, performance art, and dance were exploding among the art school and ivy league crowd; meanwhile, hip-hop and street art were surfacing in nearby, or often the same, neighborhoods. This intox-



icating and stimulating environment fostered Child's fruitful collaborations with a variety of musicians and other artists in many different configurations.

One of the difficulties in parsing Child's collaborative textures as a listener is in the challenge of hearing which sounds are second- or third-generation appropriations and which were recorded specifically for the film. Complicated issues of authorship abound. For instance, when the tail of ambient reverberation trailing a short percussion sound is interrupted, it may be taken as evidence of appropriation by the performing turntablist on the soundtrack or it may be an artifact of the montage, since it is impossible to imitate this effect in live performance except by using a recording in the first place. In her book, Child clarifies the nature of each of the many collaborations she organized. The first version of *Perils* was a collage made entirely of appropriated cartoon music, but Child decided against using it because "the sound was too dense overall." She enlisted Christian Marclay, who would soon become an international icon of high art turntablism, and percussionist Charles Noyes to improvise three tracks against the image in realtime. They picked the one they liked best and then "added two additional tracks in sectional pieces, similar to composing for silent cinema. Which seemed appropriate because the film is a homage to silent movies. Mixing the different tracks was a way to break up the wall-to-wall sound construction I had originally made."<sup>5</sup> Child used a different collaborative process on *Mayhem*: "...before I brought in the musicians, I had completed most of the sound track using Latin soap operas as my skeleton and the sound effects... Basically, I'm playing with sound but being specific to construct these textures."<sup>6</sup> The experimental musicians brought together for one session of improvising were Christian Marclay, Charles Noyes, vocalist Shelley Hirsch, and harpist Zeena Parkins. For *Mercy*, Child borrowed "acoustic material from earlier sections, specifically Shelley Hirsch's vocal improvisations created for *Mayhem*, much of which had not been used in the final mix. Her vocals find their place as the 'lead line' in this film. Additional sound includes fragments from Kagel's *Exotica* and from [various] recordings I had made."<sup>7</sup> *Mutiny*, in contrast, became a study in synch-sound: "I filmed downtown colleagues: Sally Silvers dancing in a Manhattan office, Polly Bradfield playing violin in Chinatown, Shelley Hirsch singing in Little Italy at the Sullivan Street Fair. Combining the materials, usually with their synchronous sound attached, I wanted to create a dissonant percussive *musique concrète*."<sup>8</sup> *Covert Action* was the first film in the series with multitrack sound. It features a collage of recorded voices of poets combined with noise and music fragments.<sup>9</sup>

In some ways, Bill Morrison's work also shares a great deal in common with hip-hop culture. *Decasia* is a gargantuan montage of "found" film; thus, it represents an approach closely resembling "digging in the crates," the archival technique of record-collecting that turntable artists spend a great deal of their time and other resources on, in addition to practicing their instruments.<sup>10</sup> Here Morrison has collected an assortment of archived clips of pre-1950s nitrate celluloid film, selecting them for their visible patterns of decay, for the original images captured, and for the interplay or counterpoint between the two. The long durations of these clips do not obscure the similarity between the styles of montage in Morrison's lengthy and monolithic minimalist presentation and in Child's densely composed multi-movement work. The parallel rests upon the likeness of each to the cut-and-paste aesthetic of hip-hop in which

juxtaposition, interruption, and other techniques of editing rule the flow of meanings. Furthermore, in the DVD version of *Decasia* the introduction of new polyrhythmic patterns assigned to particular timbres is closely matched to the appearance of new elements entering the frame due to panning/tracking, montage, or movement through the camera's field of capture. This greatly resembles the turntable technique of "matching beats" between music tracks of various tempi.

It is inviting to assume that these filmmakers borrowed techniques gleaned from hip-hop, but the actuality of the web of influences is much more complex. Child's "neoconstructivist poetics," a comprehensive approach that includes both her poetry and her film works, is fueled by her interest in [h]ow meaning is made, how elements join together, how far elements can stand apart and still "connect," how resonance and meaning is created, how putting together fragments of the world can create new forms, new ways of thinking, the utopian aspect, and the problematic of that desire...<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the early cinematic montage of the Soviet constructivist tradition, a movement Child has worked to progress, exerted a direct influence upon the later tape-splicing techniques of *musique concrète*,<sup>3</sup> which among other antecedents then catalyzed the development of electronic music between the world wars. This, in turn, became one of the many ancestors of hip-hop.<sup>12</sup> Progressing the circuit of influence, Michael Gordon's "Symphony" (the composition written for *Decasia*) embodies some of hip-hop's salient characteristics. For example, the endless repetition of the motives of this (and all) minimalist music closely resembles the manipulation of sound loops in hip-hop "beats," yet the instrumentation of the work is overtly traditional.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned, the various categories of musical texture identified by music scholars may provide a convenient, if basic, lexicon corresponding to the different types of relationships possible among narrative, image, and sound, as well as (by extension) to the many modes and degrees of artistic collaboration that are often the causes and/or effects of these relationships. For example, the term "monophonic" describes a musical texture in which there is only one strand of events (one "voice"). Transposed into language generally applicable to any collaborative endeavor, this concept might then be called "monovalent,"<sup>14</sup> for it involves no contemporaneous collaboration. Such would be the case in much of Abigail Child's film work, since she often works with both the sound and image herself. Other useful terms are "homophony," "heterophony," and "polyphony." A homophonic relationship between elements in a musical texture contains a foreground melody accompanied by a background of less interest. A "homovalent" collaborative texture, then, would be one in which one artist leads or organizes while the others follow. The collaborative textures designed by Child for *Perils* and *Mayhem* belong to this category. In a heterophonic musical texture, all elements are creating a single voice or activity, but with each occasionally contributing a slight variance on a purely ornamental level. "Heterovalent" collaboration might be understood, therefore, as a group activity in which all members are working toward a single common goal, but perhaps each in their own way and by different methods. On the other hand, in "polyphonic" music the various strands exhibit a high degree of interest and independence. Thus, we might call a collaborative process involving a high degree of independence



and contrast among equally active participants “polyvalent.”

As mentioned earlier, it can be difficult to separate the various strands of collaboration. Even with the aid of Child’s detailed explanation of the process in her book, the answers to some of these questions remain unclear. As Marclay describes with respect to his experiences collaborating with other DJ’s (and Child could certainly be described as a visual turntablist), “you don’t know who’s playing what,” resulting in a “leveling of the egos.”<sup>15</sup> We might call this a heterovalent texture, or perhaps a nonhierarchical or ambiguous texture. Interestingly, musical textures of this kind, though ubiquitous, do not receive much treatment in formal music training in the conservatory tradition, a further indication that the terminology I am suggesting should be used as a departure point *only*. Naturally, each of these scenarios must be fine-tuned in the analysis of specific situations with respect to degree or intensity, hybrid forms, and so forth. Moreover, these parameters may be radically dynamic, changing over time during the course of a single project.

Other elements of texture could be identified, as well. In any type of music score, whether rendered in traditional notation, in abstract graphics, or even in waveform printouts, two axes demand representation, both pertaining to time. One axis, the dimension of simultaneities (what Child calls “chords”) referred to as “vertical” among many music scholars, is used to describe individual sections or moments of the duration of the piece. In cinema, these simultaneities would include contemporaneous activities from the layers of sound, image, and if present, narrative. In Child’s work, for example, isolated deconstructionist gags occasionally interrupt the rapid flow of sound/image polyphony, such as when the sound of knocking actually matches the action of knuckles rapping on a windowpane. Child uses the vertical axis with great elegance and even poignancy, as when silence is matched with a couple dancing closely under a revolving mirror ball or with an exploding area of whiteness representing sexual climax. The other axis, the “horizontal,” designates the sequence of these simultaneities. In cinematic terms, this is montage or segmentation. We see that harsh juxtapositions permeate Child’s work at various levels, often generating a sense of irony. In *Mayhem*, for instance, awkwardly humorous material and romantic scenes in photo negative are interspersed with esoteric clips of pornography.

Keeping the grid formed by these two axes firmly in mind enables a clearer, more detailed perception of the vicissitudes of cinematic and collaborative texture. For example, the creative relationship between Child and Hirsch, to whom vocals are attributed in the credits of *Mercy*, could be described as a monovalent collaborative texture. Child recorded Hirsch’s voice and then edited it as part of the many other materials of the soundtrack. However, this type of texture is not collaborative in the usual sense of comprising synchronous layers of activity. Perhaps it would be most precise, then, to label the collaborative production process of “*Mercy*” as asynchronous and homovalent, rather than monovalent.

Morrison’s *Decasia* seems to be the product of an entirely different collaborative texture than any of the ones Child uses. In the radio interview with Kurt Anderson included on the DVD, the artists discuss the dialogic nature of their collaboration, which assumed something resembling the “call-and-response” pattern common in blues, gospel, and later traditions like rock. However, neither the film nor the music should be understood as leading the act of creation. The collaborative texture of the

piece, which yields deeply coherent results, might therefore be called “polyvalent.” The central theme of impermanence (decay and mortality) is firmly embedded in the artistic choices and processes of both Morrison and Gordon. There is a strong, yet subtle, correspondence between the friction of image and decay on the film surface and of musical structure and distortion in the symphony. For example, Gordon’s insightful subversion of the custom of playing “in tune” is a perfect vehicle for the theme of decay, for tuning must be maintained periodically and frequently corrected, since instruments that remain untuned for long periods actually lose their ability to maintain accuracy of pitch for a reasonable length of time, or in some cases to be tuned at all. Furthermore, the meanings of the film are greatly enhanced by his choice of timbres, such as rusty salvaged brake drums (a percussion instrument introduced by John Cage that has become standard issue in orchestras). Gordon wanted to make the orchestra sound old and decayed, as though it was “covered with cobwebs.” He devised a system of obliquely “distressing” the treatment of the sound itself, thereby covering up the basic musical structures of melody, harmony, and rhythm. Thus, the processes of the music evoke the process of film “development,” as well as its inversion, decay. Ideas develop very slowly, as if in honor of the decades required for the beautiful nitrate effects to emerge. The giant proportions of the piece further obscure these relationships due to the limits of short-term memory in music perception, as does the fact that this “symphony” (traditionally, an orchestral work in four movements) has only one movement.<sup>16</sup>

The dimension of live performance adds a further layer of complexity to the collaboration involved in the production of *Decasia*. According to Kurt Anderson, at the premier performed by the Basel Sinfonietta the film “accompanied” the music while, at subsequent screenings, the soundtrack has “accompanied” the film. His choice of words is somewhat misleading, because the film product is inflexible in both cases, whereas the conductor and orchestra in Basel were able to adjust their live performance; it might make more sense to say that the musicians were “accompanying” or following the film that night. Regarding the subsequent screenings: Neither the film nor the music has been adjustable since the DVD was edited to “fit” or “accompany” the recording of the live performance. So, properly speaking, there is no longer any accompaniment taking place at all.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, given the sheer logistics of orchestra performance, one could argue that even the live performance could not have been terribly flexible. For example, the conductor could do little more than perhaps lengthen or shorten a certain passage by gradually adjusting the tempo in order to compensate for playing too fast or too slow and losing synchronicity with the film (which offers very few discernible cues by which to regain orientation).

It seems likely that these simple musical principles may prove as useful in addressing the complex of relationships among sound, image, and narrative in less experimental films as they have here. Adopting such musical terminology provides a powerful starting point for thinking in more precise terms about ways of collaboration. Experimental films like *Is This What You Were Born For?* and *Decasia* are especially suitable subjects for an initial exploration of the potential of this style of analysis, because the narrative principle is either absent or greatly attenuated. Thus simplified or intensified, some of the relationships become clearer.



INTERVIEWS WITH

## Abigail Child and Michael Gordon

(interviewed separately by email)

CAROLYN ELERDING: You have invested a great deal in learning music theory and history—in your book, you refer to John Cage, Schoenberg, Thelonious Monk, and many others—and as a music scholar I find your usage of terms such as “rhythm” and “chord” tremendously insightful. Are you largely self-taught in music, or have you undertaken formal training as well?

ABIGAIL CHILD: I took piano for three years as a preteen/teenager. My teacher said I had talent but I’m not sure I was convinced. I did not practice enough. At college I wanted to take Music 1 but for some reason never did. In my early 20s I partnered with Jon Child who was a musician and recording engineer at the Hit Factory in Manhattan, then an r and b studio owned (I believe?) by Jerry Ragovoy (who wrote “Take a Piece of My Heart,” the song made famous by Janis Joplin). I hung out with Jon’s band a lot and in the recording studio. The recording studio was my education in retrospect. I remember one series of sessions when Ragovoy had a new song and he had Stevie Winwood and the band Traffic came in, cut it and then the next day or week, recorded the same song with black studio musicians. The song was completely different in tone and attack, feel—very enlightening. Later I gravitated to avant sounds. I had heard Berio in college and found Kagel’s *SPORT* in a record store in the Village and picked it up after reading the label. I would say I was adventurous in my musical tastes, omnivorous, curious, eclectic.

CE: After doing quite a bit of your own composition in sound, you collaborated with other musicians. Do you see this type of preparation as essential to successful collaboration? Should film-makers learn about music? Should musicians learn about film?

AC: I think all artists should know lots, the more the better. I am a maximalist yes! Musicians should definitely learn about film. And music is at the heart of film. These are both time arts—unstoppable—occupying space through time with movement.

*Mayhem*

CE: Your collaborative essays are the products of a wide variety of carefully structured partnerships. Similarly, your collaborations with musicians in *Is This What You Were Born For?* take different shapes in each film of the series. What informs your composition of these collaborative textures? Is there theory involved? Did you plan the various types of collaboration with musicians used in each film, or did they evolve as a result of working with the particular musicians involved? None of the above?

AC: Collaborations are amazing: always different “rules” of engagement, different ‘roles’ for the participants and the wonderful fiery excitements that two can spark. The writing collaborations were organic developments—friends or colleagues or projects for many.

In regard to the films, I had a plan for *Is This What You Were Born For?* It exists on a sheet of paper somewhere in my files from the late 1970s. At that time I conceived 7 films each with different sound/image relationships: synchronous sound (*MUTINY*), voiceover (*COVERT ACTION*), soap opera as lead (*MAYHEM*), cartoon tracks (*PERILS*) et al. I was influenced by a recent Grove Press edition of the Marquis de Sade which included different theoretical essays attached to the text. Relations of structure and content (sexuality-gender-culture). So that each film has a different shape and thrust. Sometimes the films’ structures parallel other work; for instance, a spiral structure





governs both *COVERT ACTION* and *MAYHEM* though they end up looking very different because the content is different.

"Form as an extension of content" (Charles Olson)

The early collaborations with musicians were 'found' in a way. I had cut *PERILS* with an animation sound track, layered it and found it too thick—unmusical. I brought in Christian Marclay and Charles Noyes to play *against* the tracks. They recorded 3 takes and in the mixing process I had to make sense, re-compose all the noise/sound: the original cut cartoon tracks and these 2 musicians times 3 takes and maybe 4 sections of the film (the film is only 5 minutes long so each section was

connect—and make them cross and play with each other.

**CE: How did the improvisation session for *Mayhem* work? Did you just bring everybody together and record them playing free music, or did you direct the proceedings more than that? What was your sound editing process like?**

AC: [see above for more here] I think all of the musicians had seen the film before—certainly Zeena, Shelley and Christian. Jim Black was a replacement and perhaps he had not. I talked about what was missing, what was needed, what I was thinking then in front of the Steinbeck (the machine used to edit *Mayhem*). Then at the studio, we separated the film into 5-

minute sequences and improvised probably 3 times for each. The musicians were recorded separately so they could be remixed. After the day's recording we spent several days mixing and then I spent 3 weeks cutting in parts of the track trying to make decisions between what I had had and what the musicians had given me. I would love someone to take that mix version and make a CD of it since it is unique and quite different from the mixed combined track that made it to film. Also in a film print the sound degenerates a bit over time—so things like Zeena's breathy accordion when the characters are



*Covert Action*

approximately a minute and a quarter long). In the mix, sounds/lines/phrases got taken apart and woven back in a skewed relation to the images.

I am interested in conjunctions that are unexpected, not apparent, not given or usual. They issue a kind of democracy of possibility and simultaneously research the process.

I repeated the sound recording mode with *Mayhem*, this time with a fairly complete composed soundtrack created out of my recordings and Mexican soap opera tracks that I had edited as a "lead" line through the film. I brought in 4 musicians at close to the end of the post-production process: Christian Marclay, Zeena Parkins, Shelley Hirsch and a new drummer Tim Black. Again we separated the film into quarters (this time the film is 20 minutes long so the bites were 5 minutes apiece), then improvised 3 times against the image. The process made mixing essential. In the final *Mayhem* mix, I took out most of Shelley even though she was terrific and used her song as a score for *Mercy*, the next and last film in the series.

With more recent work, I brought back close-to-the-same group for *Surface Noise* (2000). There the film was shaped overall as a sonata of found material—material that had "no use." I had met a classical musician [Anthony Brandt] at MacDowell Art Colony and he went through the structure of the sonata for me. It was very interesting to do this impossible translation: how to match up color and photographic imagery into notes and sounds and a parallel (transposed) shape. For me translation is always an approximation become its own thing. I use this idea to create new potentialities—impossible relations, things that don't

staring at each other can get lost in the prints...It would be wonderful to have a prime version of this.

**CE: When I read in your book that the final assemblage of sections of the improvised tracks on *Perils* was similar to the process of composing for silent film, I wasn't sure what you meant. Could you say more about this connection?**

AC: I was thinking of silent film when shooting *Perils*, in terms of style and in terms of early narrative and additionally inspired by the shot-order films of D. W. Griffith which I had seen in Museum of Modern Art's film library. Interestingly, there was no such thing as silent films for the public. Usually they were accompanied by music, so that having musicians play to the image in the recording studio seemed to me a throwback to that sense of live music accompaniment.

**CE: How much and in what ways have your relationships with particular musicians influenced your sound and video editing techniques? I'm thinking of Christian Marclay (who may have been performing turntables before the dawn of hip-hop) and John Zorn (who has radically expanded the field of improvisation).**

AC: I was doing this kind of work before I met John or Christian and I know both of them were using found material, quoting genre before they met me. Dziga Vertov's work and theory is more influencing for my work I would say. Yet my relation to downtown musicians (and poets) was strengthening—it supported what I was doing on my own, and of course formed a



community of common interests and excitement.

For my first public show in NYC in late fall 1979, I presented with Zorn who played solo horn. I think for a time in the 80s we were seeing so much of each other's work—there was inevitably an exchange. Definitely I have been inspired by Zorn's compositional strategies and game plans. I participated in a 16 musicians/16 prompters version of *CROQUET* at Soundscape during that time [I was a prompter]. John had seen *PERILS* and *MAYHEM* and my discussion of them as "de Sade-influenced" before he came out with his de Sade-inspired musical work.

Re: hip-hop—I remember reading critiques of hip hop music in the 80s and thinking it could perfectly describe my films from that era. I think it was both the zeitgeist and perhaps the result of being a post WW II TV generation American living in an urban setting that was layered, decayed, forgotten, vital. We made it up as we went along, and knew it was new!

**CE: Did the punk scene influence your process at all? For example, I wonder if there is a parallel between the way you worked with Marclay and Noyes, and the way a punk band might compose as a group, each member contributing a part for the others to respond and react to? How about art rock as an influence?**

AC: What I liked about the art rock/punk scene which was definitely going strong in the late 70s and early 80s in NYC was that anyone could be a member of the band. One of my favorites was *Y-pants*—a group of women artists who played electrified toy instruments. The acoustic noise level was high and the irony of these grown women playing tiny toy instruments certainly laid to rest the necessity of the alpha male rock star. It was funny, musical, and politically acute.

**CE: What do you see, if any, as the relationship between the downtown scene in NY and the concurrent emergence of hip-hop at the time? Is your editing style influenced by hip-hop: digging in the crates, making beats, and so on? Could you define the "intense collegiality" you mention that you encountered in the New York scene. Did you discuss theoretical goals, for example? Did you collaborate on a conceptual level?**

AC: Again I think it was zeitgeist and time. NY is a compressed city. Returning to it from San Francisco made me realize how layered and complex, un-airy, is the east coast compared to the west. The city is dirty, grungy, metallic, urban, so hip-hop and collage seem compatible and natural to it, as do rock and punk.

There was still a punk aesthetic downtown and altogether we were very free to do anything. Sometimes there were more people on stage than in the audience. My theory is that the time arts (though not in their commercial renditions) have taken longer to be accepted: i.e. experimental film, music, poetry and dance are less commodifiable than painting and sculpture. Thus, they have the chance to remain avant longer, out of the mainstream, on the margins with a certain freedom to explore outside the money game. We all felt this, that we were making fantastic leaps and works and experiencing colleagues and events that were wondrous /magical, even if no one else mainstream even knew of them. This was a time when people would do performances at their house for audiences of three.

The poetry scene that I was in was seriously theoretical—live-ly and political. Our ideas were similar across a number of

downtown disciplines—music, film, poetry, dance: found materials, energized montage, social consciousness, avowedly experimental.

**CE: Do you have an opinion about the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary studies and the principle of collaboration in higher education?**

AC: Certainly interdisciplinary studies and collaboration are important. The world is more and more complex and being able to hold ideas together, cross-fertilize—is a living necessity.

**CE: Here's a quote from *This Is Called Moving*: "...the increasing miniaturizing of the technologies means more students and consumers can play with the tools of production. Will this technology in the hands of citizens generate a truly oppositional style and new content, new materiality? The extent and amplitude, the innovativeness, of their response remains to be seen. If we find that audiences remain uncomfortable with abstraction, uncertainty, multiple positionality, and lack of closure—one hundred years after the discoveries of the theory of relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle—clearly the artist's job at the beginning of a new century remains unfinished." I'd like to ask you to update this statement if you are so inclined. I believe you were writing that in 2000. Have you seen any changes? What influence do you see technology having on artistic collaboration?**

AC: I think audiences in general still remain uncomfortable with abstraction, uncertainty, multiple positionality, and lack of closure. However there have been some notable breakthroughs in popular culture of film: I am thinking of Charlie Kauffman who wrote *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Gondry has been doing wonderfully reflexive work—a romantic and non-political Godard one could say. But you don't see thousands of people for a Morton Feldman 3 hour piece....

Hollywood and 'popular' audiences return to the narrative hook easily and often. There is still, I think, an attitude that irony is not sincere. In defense of irony: think of *Gulliver's Travels* where irony is utilized to make political statements. Think of the Soviet Union where irony and jokes were a kind of language used when other more blunt statements were forbidden. In other words, the need to unsettle, expand boundaries, speak out against normalization and censorship—remain an important aim—one that is not merely aesthetic but has ramifications into the social world we live in. We only *mean* in the social.

The changes in technology keep opening up crossovers, yes—the twitter phenomenon in Iran recently is relevant. However, I am seeing many of my friends use Face book for public relations, a kind of portable networking—so I think my statement of whether it will be used for innovative response to the world we live in remains a valid question. I think technology is two-edged, not a panacea. It is a tool that changes form, permits and closes, transforms, raises new questions and new issues in both ethics and aesthetics—two (mirroring) sides of human art-making and processing.

For instance we talk of the politics of the web, how it brings people together—whether in Iran recently or in the States, say, when we notify everyone of a march against the War. This is wonderful but it is different than a face-to-face flesh-to-flesh encounter. I think many people committed to computers think



of the web as Public, and it is public *in its way*. But it lacks the public of body-to-body and what it means to view something together, not in separate rooms. There's an isolation and dependency on machine that needs to be noted, even as we love the ease, speed, openings and expansion the web brings. The future will tell (more).

—Abigail Child July 2009 Rosebay, Nova Scotia

CAROLYN ELERDING: Did you and Bill Morrison design your style of collaboration beforehand, or did it evolve over time?

MICHAEL GORDON: Bill and I have collaborated on a variety of projects dating back to the late 1990s.

CE: How did you meet? How did you start developing the project together?

MG: He made a one-minute film for an opera of mine, *Chaos* (1998). The film was used in the opening scene of *Chaos*. I don't know if Bill and I met at that time. In *Carbon Copy Building* (1999) we worked on a music theater project that involved Ridge Theater, comic book artist Ben Katchor, and 3 composers. Bill and I were given the task of writing the music and film for a scene called *City Walk*. Without ever meeting to talk about the scene, Bill created the film and I created the music. We met at the rehearsal when both were put together. When we give classes together we often show the film of *City Walk* and ask the participants if they think the music came first or the film. The point is this, somehow this collaboration works. It's not because we have a plan or a style of collaboration. If anything, the style is very hands off, very independent.

*Decasia* began originally as a piece of music with an environmental set. You can read about the origins of all of this at [decasia.org](http://decasia.org). Bill came in with some rough footage he was excited about and showed it to me and Bob McGrath and Laurie Olinder, the two other principal artists in Ridge Theater (along with Bill). It was exciting, and we decided then to create a piece based on this material. I tried to imagine what music might fit with this decaying footage, what might be the sonic equivalent, and then continued to write the orchestral score to *Decasia*.

Bill worked quite independently, continuing to gather material. Several times in the course of writing the score I played what I had for Bill, Laurie and Bob. Similarly, Bill showed us a rough cut of *Decasia* before the concert premiere in Basel in 2001. At that concert, the film and music were put together for the first time, in a very loose way. Right after the first performances we recorded the music. Then Bill set to re-editing the film, cutting it to the recording. This re-edit became the film version of *Decasia*.

CE: Did the punk or rock scenes influence your process at all? For example, I wonder if there is a parallel between the way you worked with Morrison, and the way a band might compose as a group, each member contributing a part for the others to respond and react to? How about art rock as an influence?

MG: I can't fully answer. Everyone is influenced to some degree by this because it is in the air. The score for *Decasia* is written for large orchestra, 55 musicians, but they are all amplified and I do use a guitar, a bass, and 4 sampler keyboards. So the sound source comes from both the classical and rock worlds.

CE: Did you study film theory to prepare for this project? How about film scoring or silent film accompaniment?

MG: I don't know anything about film theory or silent film accompaniment. As you can probably make out, I didn't write the score to accompany *Decasia*. We created parallel pieces and then put them together. But in a certain sense, since Bill cut *Decasia* to the music, Bill really put this together, or in a way, made a film to accompany the music.

**Carolyn Elerding** is a music scholar and composer in Minneapolis, MN. Her frequently interdisciplinary works explore relationships among music, rhetoric, critical theory, and philosophy. Recently, her first opera was premiered.

More information on Abigail Child and her films is available at

[www.abigailchild.com](http://www.abigailchild.com) and also at

[www.brightlightsfilm.com/32/abigailchild.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/32/abigailchild.html)

More on Michael Gordon may be found at

[www.bangonacan.org/about\\_us/michael\\_gordon](http://www.bangonacan.org/about_us/michael_gordon)

More about *Decasia* is available at [www.decasia.com](http://www.decasia.com)

Notable composers of *musique concrète*

## Notes

- 1 Tom Gunning, Foreword to *This Is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film*, by Abigail Child (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 6.
- 2 Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 475.
- 3 Ibid. Gordon accents this legacy in the *Decasia* soundtrack by adding electric guitar played in an ambient heavy metal style to the standard symphonic orchestration of woodwinds, brasses, percussion, piano, and strings. The proportions of certain instrumental sections of the ensemble are exaggerated. For example, calling for four pianos is highly unusual. The unanimous detuning (*scordatura*) may also be unprecedented.
- 4 Abigail Child, *This Is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 8.
- 5 Ibid., 224.
- 6 Ibid., 224.
- 7 Ibid., 237.
- 8 Ibid., 200.
- 9 Ibid., 209, 219.
- 10 Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 79-100.
- 11 Child, 5-6.
- 12 Ross, xii.
- 13 In hip-hop, unlike in many other musics, such as classical or country-western, a "beat" is not a point in time demarcating a unit of metric pulsation, but a duration (which is also how the word "beat" is used in theater). In hip-hop, the word is usually used to designate a loop or basic unit of assemblage using materials appropriated from found recordings. In the '70s and early '80s this was accomplished manually with analog technology by manipulating phonograph records (or in the classical tradition, by splicing tape); since the late '80s the raw materials usually have been digital samples.
- 14 "-Valent" is preferable to "-modal", because the word "mode" has already acquired competing technical meanings in music.
- 15 Jon Nelson, "Interview with Christian Marclay." *Some Assembly Required: Tape Manipulations, Digital Deconstructions and Turntable Creations*, episode 85 (broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio on Monday, June 12, 2006). <http://www.some-assembly-required.net/blog/2006/06/episode-85-some-assembly-required.html>
- 16 Interestingly, the film is divided into four chapters or "movements": "Creation" (12:19), "Civilization" (16:18), "Conundrum" (21:44), and "Integration and Rebirth" (16:04). It is doubtful, though, whether a viewer could discern discrete contrasts between and among these chapters.
- 17 The term "accompaniment" hosts hierarchical connotations that rarely apply even to Western classical music of the so-called "common practice period" rooted in the seventeenth century and extending its branches into the present. Piano "accompanists" today often prefer the term "collaborative pianist" or even "collaborative artist," because their contribution is equal to, if not weightier than, that of the so-called "soloist" (whose performance might not be well-received, or even possible, if it were indeed solo). There is a degree in "collaborative piano" offered at many music schools.



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